

Easter IV A, April 30, 2023

“And Have It Abundantly”

ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Acts 2: 42-47 • Psalm 23 • 1 Peter 2: 19-25 • John 10: 1-10



Have you ever heard the expression, “It’s simple, but it’s not easy,”? Everybody’s got a slightly different take on what it means, but the basic idea is that while something can be quickly understood, it might still take quite a lot of effort to implement. For example, any time I am presented with a project of putting something together, like a new bookshelf, or piece of Ikea furniture, I begin to break out into a sweat. I know people that don’t even need to look at the instructions to throw those things together. They take one look at the picture, they glance at the pieces and at the hardware, they grab their tools, and boom, a new bookshelf and in less than thirty minutes. Not me. No matter how hard I try I always set that stuff up wrong somehow. I’ve got the back piece in the front, or the left piece on the right, and then I’ve got to reverse it and do it again. It’s simple to put this stuff together. I understand how it should go. But for some reason, for me, it’s not easy, and it takes forever. Maybe you’re the same way, or maybe

you've got something else at which you're particularly hopeless, but you get the idea.

The same sort of thing is going on in this strange little story Jesus is telling us today about sheep and shepherds, gates, thieves, and pastures. In verse 4 he says, "the sheep follow him because they know his voice." And then again in verse 5, "they will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Now the common interpretation of this passage is that we are the sheep, Jesus the Shepherd. This is an interpretation at which we should all be offended. Sheep are just not smart. Being called a sheep is like being called dumb. But no matter how dumb sheep actually are, they are apparently still smart enough to know their shepherd's voice from that of a stranger. I've got a dog like that. When I get home and walk up to the front door, she starts whining like there's no tomorrow. But you try and come up to my front door and see what happens.

If we follow this analogy and accept that we are the sheep, then it seems like our job in this life is to be able to hear Jesus' voice and

distinguish it from the voices of strangers. Having distinguished Jesus' voice, we are to follow it, and when we follow it we find ourselves in green pastures where there is plenty of sustenance, shade, and company. In other words, when we follow Jesus' voice, we find abundant life. Sounds simple, right? It sure is. But that doesn't mean it's easy. It's quickly understood, no doubt, but putting it into practice in our life? Yeah, it's not easy. So, what is it about us that makes us so stubborn? What is it about us that causes us to not be able to discern Jesus' voice from the stranger's voice, or having discerned it correctly, to ignore it willfully?

Well, I submit to you that a really big part of it is the human condition. We see it going almost all the way back to the beginning. When God gave Moses the law God said the purpose of the law was so it will go well for you in the land which you are to inherit. The whole reason God gave us the law was so that things would go well for us. And what did Moses find when he came down off the mountain. That's right, everybody was piling all their gold together to fashion an idol. I bet they had this real sheepish look on their face too, pun intended. The cycle repeated itself over and over and over again. The rest of the history as recorded in the Hebrew

scriptures is God sending someone to remind the people of Israel of the relationship they have with God. It was clear they recognized the voice of God, they just had to be reminded of why that mattered. Eventually God got tired of sending someone else to do it and became incarnate in human flesh. Want something done right, you gotta do it yourself. So Jesus comes to us not only to remind us that he is the good shepherd, but to remind us why it matters. And it matters because we know Jesus, we've trusted Jesus, we'll trust Jesus again, and through Jesus we'll be able to tell the difference between false hope and true hope. Jesus the Good Shepherd reminds us that he's got us, that we're good in his arms. That seems to be a reminder we need an awful lot.

But it's only the first half of a promise that this passage gives to us. The second half of it is really encouraging, because we are so often tempted to hear Jesus' promise that he's got us, and think that only matters for the hereafter. But that's not what Jesus says here, just like it wasn't what God said to those Israelites over and over and over again. After declaring that the voices of the strangers and the thieves are only after us to get us and take what we love away from us, Jesus tells us, "I came that they may have

life and have it abundantly.” It’s my absolute favorite passage in the Bible. It’s the second half of the promise we hear today. If the first half of the promise is “I’ve got you!” then the second half is Jesus telling us, no matter what our circumstances, “You’ve got this!” The reason we’re supposed to exercise some discernment over which voice to follow isn’t just so we end up on the right side of the pearly gates, it’s so we’ll have life as abundantly as we can right now, right here on this good, green earth. God wants it to go well for us. And God promises that not only does God have our back, but that if we hear his voice and walk through his gate we can do this thing called life, and we can do it well.

So if the first half of the promise is all about what God in Christ is doing for us – protecting us, guarding us, feeding us, providing for us, and giving us life – then the second part of the promise is a promise about how we’ll respond: with faithfulness, trust, listening hearts and joyful spirits. In Christ we will thrive. God wants us to have life and have it abundantly. You hear that word, “abundantly”? It’s important, because it means more than just getting by. It’s equally as important to say here that this idea has been abused by those preachers of the prosperity Gospel, who twist the

concept of abundant life into meaning only material gain. That isn't what this means. Abundant life can take as many forms as there are people in this room. Abundant life means living the life that God has gifted you to the fullest extent that you can. Why? Because Jesus is with you and for you, and Jesus has every confidence in you that you will listen to his voice and enter into the abundant life to which he calls you. It's simple, but it's not easy. Keep practicing, because in Christ, we are more than conquerors.

Alleuia!

Amen.