

Sermon – John 10:11-18; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
4 Easter – Year B  
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“What is Love?”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I don't recall what he was mad about. Two-year olds tend to get upset about the strangest things. I do remember that he was very deliberate. He slowly packed his suitcase, his *Sesame Street* Elmo suitcase, with goodness knows what inside, and then walked out the door, down the driveway, into the cul-de-sac, and off into the rest of his life. Before the cul-de-sac merged into the cross street, he'd had a change of heart, setting aside his grievances and turning toward home. I imagine this felt like a grand adventure on his part, but the truth of the matter is we would not have let Anders wander far. Our flock wouldn't be complete without him.
2. The ability to wander off is not confined to toddlers. As both Isaiah and Handel remind us, all we like sheep have gone astray. Whether we wander off willfully or are chased off by wolves, we tend to find ourselves in need. Lost. Misguided. Mired in sin. Bedeviled by voices that would do us harm. And where is God in these moments? If Jesus spoke in the language of parent with toddlers on the run, perhaps we'd speak of The Good Parent on the Front Porch Smirking While Drinking Coffee Because He's Pretty Sure the Kid Isn't Going Too Far Anyway. Which would be a silly name for a congregation, but whatever. Jesus' context was pastoral, not suburban. We get the Good

Shepherd. But context is not the only difference. Jesus doesn't just stand any old where, waiting for us to come home. Jesus comes after us. Relentlessly.

3. Jesus is innocent, but he is anything but a bystander. St. John writes, "We know love by this, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." Not like a hired hand who runs at the first sight of trouble. Not like the kings of old who scattered their flocks through idolatry and injustice. But as a Good Shepherd who lays down his life of his own accord for the sake of the sheep. Make no mistake, the cause of Jesus' death is the weight of human sin. We are each responsible, and it was very real people making very real choices, religious and political leaders conspiring against him, who put Jesus to death. But in the incalculable love of God, Jesus takes on this weight willingly. For us. Jesus walks headlong into the cul-de-sac of sin, suffering, and death, knowing full well what will happen to him. But he does not turn back. Stretching wide his arms upon the cross with love for this world that God so loves, the great I Am shows just how good a shepherd he is.
  
4. But while the cross is the clearest example of love the world has ever seen, it would be a mistake to limit our understanding of Jesus laying down his life to his hours on the cross, or even to the days of his Passion. Instead, Jesus' whole life, his entire way of being in the world, is one of laying down his life. Beginning with the incarnation itself, in which he set aside the joys of heaven, to the ways in which he continually lived for others, healing the sick, welcoming the stranger, eating with the outcast, he was always laying down his life to give life to others. And while we are not called, thank God, to give our lives in the way that Jesus did, we *are* called to give our lives in the way that Jesus did. Jesus saw the needs of creation and all who dwell therein. Clear eyed, he gave his life for us. Our vision is not as far reaching as that of God's Son, but we, too, see need in our midst. And how, John asks, does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods but sees a neighbor in need and refuses to help?

5. Last night, a number of people from Grace participated in the Harmony Community Cares gala. Money was raised to support work of Harmony in North Lawndale, which so many of you support week after week by giving your time. Last year, Harmony distributed nearly 500,000 pounds of food to more than 5,000 different people. Last year they gave backpacks filled with essential items to nearly 400 new neighbors, those seeking asylum in our city. They provide tutoring and arts education for community youth. And we get to help! Harmony sees sisters and brothers in need and, for the sake of Christ, lays itself down in service to others. At the same time last night, high school youth from Grace joined with youth from United and Good Shepherd Lutheran Churches in Oak Park to pack meals at Feed My Starving Children. Their efforts will help this Christian non-profit, which sees every child as whole in body and spirit, feed over a million children this year with a meal for each day of the year. These Lutheran teenagers could have been doing whatever it is that teenagers do these days on a Saturday night (and even as the parent of a teenager, I'm not entirely sure what that is). Instead, they set aside their own wants and laid down their lives for children in need. Jesus told us that this is how the world will know us. Not first for foremost by what we say, but by what we do. This is how we live out the Maundy Thursday commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us.
  
6. As we walk through this world's dark places, eyes open for opportunities to show and share the love we have received, we do not walk alone. Our Shepherd is not one who waits for us on the far side of trouble. He journeys with us, even into death's dark vale, speaking comfort and peace to us as we learn to trust his voice, and his voice alone. As Martin Luther preached in 1544, "Now if we want to be faithful Christians, then we must act like dear sheep who recognize the shepherd's voice and listen to it alone." And when other voices seek to pull us away? To that Luther encourages us to say, "Now scam with your wolf's howl! I will cling to my shepherd."

7. We cling to the Shepherd who walks with us, whether we are in green pastures and beside still waters, or in the very shadow of death itself. Jesus walks with us, laying down his life to bring us into life. A table set with a feast. Cups overflowing. The meal is set even now. As the poet Wendell Berry reminds us, we pray “to be / quiet in heart, and in eye / clear. What we need is here.” What we need is here, supplied and set forth by the Good Shepherd who is also the Lamb of God. He has laid down his life for you and taken it back up. In him you are alive. Listen to his voice. Live with eyes open. See the needs of your neighbors and look for ways to love them. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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