

Sermon – John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

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Grace Lutheran Church

4 Easter – Year C

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“Led to the Springs of Life”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He 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. The year I spent in Scotland was, in many ways, incredible. I mean, at no other point in my life have I had such easy access to haggis, bangers and mash, neeps and tatties. The sound of bagpipes was everywhere, and that’s always a good thing. But it was also a disorienting year. For one thing, people in Scotland don’t speak English. I mean, they do, but it took my ears weeks to even begin to comprehend what anyone was saying. But what really took me by surprise, even though I expected it, is how short the days are. In the dead of winter – a cold, rainy time – the sun doesn’t rise until 7:30. And by a little after four in the afternoon, it’s already beginning to set. To be sure, this is not nearly as extreme as life in the arctic, but it’s unnerving. To be up before the sun, and to be up long after the sun has gone to bed, is not just odd. It left me feeling trapped, enclosed. Like living in a valley of time in which daylight has a hard time peaking over the steep walls that rise on either side.
2. Life is full of valleys. We walk in them often. Whether caused by a lack of daylight, a paucity of possibility, or other sorts of lack and loss, dearth or death, we are all too familiar with the valleys of this world. The walls rise upon either side, blocking out the sun and obscuring the horizon. When, we

ask, will we come back out into verdant pastures, when see still waters once more?

3. This, perhaps, is why the psalmist sings of death's dark valley, because it is so common to our lives. Certainly, because death is the common denominator of our humanity, but also because in life, daily, we feel hemmed in. On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, the psalmist reminds us of the valleys through which we walk. But the psalmist also proclaims the great truth of the gospel: We do not walk through the valley alone. The Shepherd is with us. At all times and in all things.
4. One of my favorite Bible camp songs – and no, I won't make you sing it – is "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep." It's cute and funny and little kids love it. But why would one want to be a sheep? As a twenty-first century pastor, I have very little pastoral experience. I can't think of the last time I've been in a pasture. But the implications of all this sheep talk are clear. In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Lutheran pastor and professor Katherine Shaner puts it this way: "Anyone who has seen actual sheep knows that they rarely (if ever) look like they just came out of the stuffy aisle at the toy store. Sheep wander around unfarmed pastureland. They kick up the muck of a rain-soaked pen. They live amid the brambles and brush of a rocky landscape. They are muddy and smelly. They have sticks and gunk in their wool. They have slobbery noses" and "attract all manner of annoying insects and parasites. And they are not," she concludes, "worried about sharing these repulsions with each other." You get the idea. I just wanna be a sheep? Really? Yes. Because the beauty and grace of being a sheep is not about being a sheep. It is about having a shepherd. And we who follow and worship the risen Christ have a Shepherd who is Good.
5. Last Sunday in worship, we had the blessing of witnessing the baptisms of Kelly, Vivi, and Ruby. Each of these precious children was named and claimed

by their Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Each of them was marked with cross, sealed with the Spirit, and anointed with oil. Over the past few days, we have gathered to commend three other saints – Cathy, Pat, John – into the eternal embrace of our God. At the end of their lives, each of them was anointed with oil again, sealed by the same promise. We, friends, all live between these two moments, the sacrament of Holy Baptism in which our living bodies are welcomed into Jesus’ death, and our mortal end in which are dying bodies are welcomed into the fullness of Jesus’ resurrection. Whatever happens in between, however long or short the span of time, the promise is that the One who did not turn from death but gave himself up upon the cross will also not turn away from us in our need. In the valley, Jesus is with us, comforting us with rod and staff, with goodness and mercy that will not let us go but instead propel us back into the unending fields of God’s grace and love.

6. Today, I am mindful of my mom. While she was not perfect, she loved me with a fierce love that was not in any way diminished even though it was divided between me and my brother. She loved us both fully, could make us each feel like we were her whole world. Perhaps this is why the 23rd Psalm is so personal, because it gets after the way God loves us. In the other psalms that speak of God as shepherd, it’s always “our shepherd.” And this is a welcome reminder in a world, a society, that would have us focus so much on ourselves. But today, we hear that the Lord is “my” Shepherd, “your” Shepherd. And not just in some future out there, but right now, present tense, here. Yes, God loves all of us. Jesus died and was raised for all of us. But also, for each of us. For you. With a maternal love that is big enough for billions but also knows you. Holds you. Walks with you. That you would know that no matter how close, how high, are the walls of the valley, they will not go on forever. The unending horizon of grace will one day break upon us. Even now, in the midst of all that troubles us, our Shepherd has set a feast for us, a feast in which the Shepherd becomes also the Lamb who sits upon the throne

as the life of all creation. Turns out, being a sheep isn't *baaaad* at all; not when the Shepherd is so Good. Amen.

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

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