

## **Easter 4B. John 10:11-18. April 22, 2018.**

We have now reached that part of the Easter season when it doesn't feel that Eastery anymore. Those of us who plunged deep into the many services of Holy Week have recovered from the fatigue of our spiritual exertions. The holy excess we indulged in after bursting out of the Lenten fast is starting to get a bit overripe. The last Cadbury egg has been plucked from the sale shelf, to be stored until next March when, if we're honest, the same leftover candies will probably be trotted back out for sale again. And here, too, our shining white altar hangings have collected a few wine stains, our freshened up vestments are inching inexorably towards their habitual crustiness.

And most obviously, we seem to have run out of biblical resurrection stories. All along in Easter our first readings are from the book of Acts, as we trace the first days of the church after the risen Jesus appeared to his friends and then, eventually, ascended, leaving them to carry on his work. But now in our gospel readings, we stop reading stories of the first week after Easter, when all was stunned and delighted incomprehension. Now our attention shifts: the events of Holy Week and Easter were glorious; and now we take a breath and reach further back into Jesus' life to consider what on earth those events mean.

I chose those last words with care, because one of our fundamental convictions is that the resurrection has meaning in the present tense here, now, on earth as addressed to us. When we read and hear these stories and teachings, we aren't just remembering some meaningful quotes. We are allowing ourselves to be addressed by the God who even now is working out our salvation and calling us to join in the great work of reconciling the world to God.

So if we are turning to what the resurrection means, and trying to be addressed directly by these stories, then what does this text tell us? The most jarring part of this passage, for me, is buried after all the soporific sheep stuff when Jesus gives what I take to be a preemptive reinterpretation of his death and resurrection. He says, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

To be honest, it isn't my preferred understanding of those mighty acts we recounted three weeks ago. The other gospels show Jesus knowing what is coming and refusing to alter his behavior in order to avoid death. But it's clear that the military apparatus of the empire and the collaborating religious authorities are the ones who put him to death. John, however, is unconcerned with my preferences. In the gospel of John, no one kills Jesus—he gives his life away. The empire and the priests play the parts that Jesus gives them. He directs the whole thing, never quite touching the ground as he walks

through death towards Easter. This story we read today occurs much earlier in Jesus' ministry, but it is already an interpretation of his death and resurrection.

This means that resurrection is not a reward given after great suffering. It is, rather, a part of the fundamental pattern of the Christian life, which is always a matter of giving our lives away and having them given back to us. Obviously this can mean a moment of risking death for the wellbeing of those for whom we care. But I think that it's even more basic to the fabric of what it means to be a Christian. We are always to be in the process of laying down our lives for one another. The author of 1 John makes this the test of how we know that God's love abides in us: if we lay down our lives for each other, which he takes to mean loving each other and using "the world's goods" to help siblings who are in need. This love isn't a matter of word or speech, but of truth and action. There's a remarkably clear and mundane calculus in our second reading. Does God's love abide in us? Well, we can answer that by evaluating whether or not we lovingly lay down our lives for each other. And we can tell how well we love each other simply by looking at whether or not we use the world's goods to help those in need.

Participating in Easter calls us into this kind of life—the life that is shaped by being given away and given back. We differ from the good shepherd in that we cannot do either alone. We certainly cannot just take back up a life that has been laid down; we cannot resurrect ourselves. And the church has usually taught that it also takes grace for us to be able to give our lives away. But Easter assures us of the grace necessary for both. God helps us to give ourselves away and God will bring us back to life and this is what it means to be a Christian and to be the Church. Amen.