

# Sermon: Easter 4

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April 26, 2015

Year B  
Acts 4:5-12  
Psalm 23  
1 John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

The Sadducees are concerned... not only have another 5,000 people come to trust Jesus... but they're responsible for making sure large crowds don't form... they know the Romans don't ignore such crowds... and Peter and John have just healed a man in Jesus' name... and the Roman Peace... from which the Sadducees benefit... is in jeopardy... so they've had Peter and John arrested...

But Peter's defense is that he and John have done a *mitzvah*... an act of kindness... what's the big deal... especially since they haven't done it by themselves... but with the help of the Holy Spirit... but leadership's concern... like it usually is... is about losing control... about losing power... but one does not control the Holy Spirit... and the love of God... through the functioning of the Holy Spirit... is to restore wholeness and health...

This is the same loving care expressed in today's Psalm... the sheep are dependent on the shepherd... and the shepherd cares passionately for the sheep and has the resources to provide for them and the strength to protect them...

And when he proclaims himself to be the Good Shepherd... Jesus draws on the images and theology from Ezekiel 34... when Ezekiel wrote... *The word of the LORD came to me: O mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophecy, and say to them: Thus says the Lord: Ah, you shepherds of Israel, you have been tending yourselves! Is it not the flock that the shepherds ought to tend? You partake of the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, and you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not tend the flock. You have not sustained the weak, healed the sick, or bandaged the injured; you have*

*not brought back the strayed, or looked for the lost; but you have driven them with harsh rigor, and they have been scattered for want of anyone to tend them; scattered, they have become prey for every wild beast. Hear then, O shepherds, the word of the LORD! As I live — because My flock has been a spoil — I am going to deal with the shepherds! I will demand a reckoning of them for My flock, and I will dismiss them from tending the flock. The shepherds shall not tend themselves any more; for I will rescue My flock from their mouths, and it shall not be their prey... Strong words...*

These words are not simply what Jesus recalls from Ezekiel... they're a fire that burns in his heart... and with them he indicts the leadership of his time... leaders who seek their own empowerment... those who have the resources... but choose not to care for the hungry... the sick... or the lost...

Some of them might also behave like hired hands... who run away when there's danger... when the wolf prowls... when there's fear... but Jesus says don't fear... he'll give up his own self-interest... self-preservation... selfishness... and lay down his life for them...

Of course there are some who don't run away... and who stand up to the wolves of the world so they can protect the sheep... they are grounded in the love of Christ... After the outbreak of World War II... Maximilian Kolbe was one of the few Polish Franciscan brothers who remained in their monastery... he and other monks provided shelter to refugees... including more than 1,000 Jews whom he hid from Nazi persecution in their friary... and the monastery continued to publish a number of anti-Nazi publications... but in February 1941 it was shut down by the German authorities... and Kolbe was arrested and transferred to Auschwitz as prisoner #16670.

Several months later... three prisoners disappeared from the camp... and as punishment... the commander picked 10 men to be starved to death in an underground

bunker... when one of them cried out... "My wife! My children!" ... Kolbe volunteered to take his place... and in October 1982 he was canonized...

But one doesn't embody this love in action... in a vacuum... unaided and alone... it's only possible through that... which connects us to each other... and to creation... I won't say that names *never* matter... but what we call it... is less important than what it does or how it functions...

Shakespeare realized this in his 1595 play Romeo and Juliet... when Juliet said about Romeo... *That which we call a rose... by any other name... would smell as sweet...* Juliet realizes that Romeo's name doesn't matter nearly as much as how he behaves... his style of functioning... and how she feels about him...

Many of you know that I attended the Mid-Michigan Interfaith Dialogue Symposium last Sunday... there were devout Jews... Muslims... Hindus... Sikhs... and B'haís... among others... devout people... who may use different names... who may speak with different voices... but who all speak to the same God...

In today's reading from Acts... Peter says: *There is salvation in no one else... for there is no other name under heaven... given among mortals... by which we must be saved.*

My session at the symposium... intended to address this Christian exclusivity... was based on a comparable passage from John 14: *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me...* Religious leadership is beginning to realize this need... and I believe that through interfaith efforts like this... we must... reverse the *I'm right - you're wrong - shut up* certainty about religion that Brené Brown talked about in the video I referenced during Holy Week ... it doesn't take much to realize that all around the world... this religious certainty is killing us...

In today's Gospel... when Jesus says: *I lay down my life*... in the Greek... the word that's *translated* as life... comes from the word *psyche*... and means... soul... self... inner life... Jesus was certainly killed because of the same kind of religious certainty of his time... but his certainty came from the relationship he had with his Father... and it could withstand other kinds of life-giving diversity... and every time anyone of us puts another person first... we share in that same self-giving death...

We don't live in the world that Jesus lived in... though there are still dictators who act with blatant self-interest... in our country... outright Roman oppression has given way to a democracy... of sorts... but there are still shepherds like those referred to in Ezekiel... there are all kinds of leaders who tend to themselves and not the flock... who give themselves pay raises... who pass laws which provide benefits to a select few or keep them from the many... and who don't bring back... or seem to care about the strayed... some of whom do fall prey to different forms of radicalism...

We live in a country that gives us the right to vote... in many ways that in itself is like being given free will... the opportunity to shape the government which governs us... but some of these shepherds make voting more of a challenge than it ought to be... I think some of the shepherds... and some of the wolves want us to remain scattered... want to incite divisiveness to keep us distracted from the real issues... look at how long it took for Loretta Lynch to be confirmed... Religious Freedom Restoration Acts are being passed out of a misguided form of certainty... and you know... a politician actually recently proposed a law... that would require anyone who wanted to become an American citizen... to have to first convert to Christianity...

There's the hired hand who runs away when the wolf comes... but there's also the hired hand who stands firm and faces the wolf... like Maximilian Kolbe did... because they know that Jesus destroyed death... but we can't do this alone... we can do it only with the Spirit that strengthens and connects us...

Some of you will remember that I'm a movieholic... because I think writers... cinematographers... and special effects people can free us from our tunnel vision... and help us glimpse what's possible... there's a movie being released on May 22 called Tomorrowland... in the trailer... the narrator asks us: *What if there was a place... a secret place... where nothing was impossible... a miraculous place... where you could actually change the world... you wanna go?*

I trust with all I am... that such a place exists... but before it can be made real out here... it must first be made real in here... and part of how we make it real in here... is not by believing something which is incomprehensible... but by continuing what we began in baptism... by dying to our old selves over and over again... not necessarily being killed by the sin of our world... the way Jesus was... but by letting our psyches be transformed... over and over again...

The Greek word *pisteuō* appears 135 times in the Gospels... it's almost always translated as "believe" but could just as easily be translated as "trust..." the problem is that we are usually asked to believe in something beyond our comprehension... though it makes more sense for us to trust in our developing relationship with God.

I think our friend Richard Rohr would be familiar with this Tomorrowland place... and I trust he knows how to get there... he wrote: *We worshipped Jesus... instead of following him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion... instead of a journey toward union with God... and everything else. This shift made us into a religion of "belonging and believing"... instead of a religion of transformation.*

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil shows us that we have great power... and there are bad shepherds and wolves who don't want the good to flourish... who incite fear... and who work hard at it... but we have free will... we can choose to transform ourselves in here... so we can transform the world out there... but we don't do it alone... by ourselves we are too weak... we do it with each other... And like Peter and

John... with the help of The Good Shepherd... and the Holy Spirit which burns within us...

Names can be important... but even if we called the Holy Spirit by another name... as some at the Interfaith Symposium did... it would still be as sweet... and do what it does... and give us the power to do what we need to do. Holy God... make it so.

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