



May 3, 2020 Easter 4A
John 10:1-10
Jesus Leads Us Out

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! And yet it still feels a lot like Lent. Lent is time of sacrifice and thoughtful reflection and improvement. And thanks to COVID-19, we are still sacrificing and still have a lot of time for thoughtful reflection for our improvement.

Let's move into Easter. Let's move into resurrection. Let's turn to the Good Shepherd, the Risen Jesus today, and let Him lead us out.

John 10:3-4 He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out," John 10:3 says. Leads them out of what? Or for what? Leads them out of the sheep fold? Leads them out into the mission field? Leads them out of the coronavirus? Wouldn't that be great?

Let's dig in to this text. First, notice that in John chapter 10, Jesus employs the imagery of first-century shepherding practice in an attempt to reveal his own identity and his relationship to us. Now I have very little experience with sheep. If you're anything like me, you have no clue about shepherding practice of any sort, ancient or modern. Therefore, in order to access what John calls a "figure of speech," we first acknowledge our lack of personal contact with Jesus' choice of image, and second we embrace the opportunity to use our imaginations.

So imagine with me a rolling plain, dotted with humps and hillocks. Dusk descends, and the shepherd leads his flock into the sheepfold. One of the hillocks has been hollowed out, and the sheep huddle inside next to the sheep of several other shepherds who share this particular fold. A pair of piled rock walls extends out a few feet from the sides of the hill. The shepherd lies down in the space between the low walls, effectively sealing the enclosure. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time

getting in with the shepherds on guard. The sheep are safe in the sheepfold.

When the shepherd arises the next morning, Jesus explains, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." The sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe the enclosure may be. There's no food in the fold, after all. The sheep may be comfortable and safe, but the sheep must follow the shepherd out of the fold in order to find sustenance, in order to live.

Now, back to "he leads them out."

I was poking around in the Greek New Testament this week and found something interesting about the word choice here for "lead out" and "brought out." Jesus' choice of words here is telling, but our translation into English hides the special word that Jesus uses. "When he has *brought out* all of his own, he goes ahead of them," says Jesus in the version we use in church. In this verse, there's a fairly weak rendering of a Greek word that appears over and over again in the Gospel. We hear this word every time Jesus *casts out* a demon. We hear this word when Jesus makes a whip and *throws* the moneychangers out of the temple. We hear this word when Jesus speaks of *driving out* the "ruler of this world." In every instance of this word in the Gospel, Jesus is doing some sort of battle: he is pushing, pulling, throwing, yanking, driving, exorcising, casting out. There's some force here—some dragging and pulling and maybe some kicking and screaming.

Now, perhaps those dimwitted, woolly animals trod placidly from the fold every morning at the beckoning of the shepherd. But Jesus is, of course, not talking about real sheep. He's talking about us, about you and me. He's talking about calling out to us, about speaking the word that will bring us forth from our own sheepfolds, from those places of comfort and safety that we have built up around us. The seductive force that pulls us into these personal sheepfolds tells us that everything will be okay as long as we keep quiet and stay put. I don't know about you, but I need to be pushed, pulled, thrown, yanked, and driven out of that place of stagnation and dormancy every time I start settling into my comfortable enclosure.

For 47 days, we have been in a sheepfold called "Shelter in Place." It can be quite comfortable. It can lull us into complacency. It is make us adopt an attitude of sit and wait. That's not life. It's not life abundant. It's existing. It is so easy to sit and do nothing—let our minds be numbed. Let our hearts hibernate. Let our spirits deflate.

But that's not our reality. Our Shepherd leads us out of that. This is the message of the Resurrection: life cannot be conquered-- not by death, not by sin, not by the powers of darkness. Life happens--fully, intensely, eternally. Indeed, Jesus tells us this morning: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The Resurrection of Jesus Christ ripples out to touch every life, everywhere, for all time. The wonder of Easter morning shows us the utter lengths that God goes to offer us abundant life.

And yet, while life cannot be conquered, life can be delayed, put on hold, made dormant. When we retreat to the safety and comfort of our own personal sheepfolds--whatever they may be--we refuse to participate in the fullness of a life lived in God. Of course, existing in the sheepfold is easier, less demanding. But existence is not life. Ease does not bring joy. And less demanding often means less fulfilling.

We need a way out. We need a gate in the sheepfold. And I have Good News!

John 10:9-10 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

We cannot import into our sheepfolds the abundant life that Christ offers us because the very fullness of that life cannot fit inside a safe, comfortable enclosure. Christ drives us out of the sheepfold so that our lives have the opportunity to expand, that we may embrace God's unrestrained abundance. During this season of Easter, join God in the expansive life found in the Resurrection. Listen for the voice of the shepherd calling you by name, calling you out of complacency. And give Christ the chance to cast you out of your sheepfold so that you may find the fullness of a life lived in the abundance of God. Amen.