

The 4th Sunday of Easter (C)
May 12, 2019
Text: John 20:19-31

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I want to be strong enough and clear-headed enough to be able to resist the flood of anger and the fear that are driving the polarization of our society, to not be pushed toward hopelessness, but instead be able to respond creatively and compassionately. I want you to be strong enough to resist the anger and the fear that make labeling and pigeonholing people an acceptable way of relating to others, and instead be able to live with open hearts. I want all of us together, as a community, to be strong enough to stay focused on Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, of inclusive community and love of enemies. What I heard at our leadership retreat a week ago is that we are that kind of community, and we want to continue to grow as that kind of gracious, compassionate presence in the world. We want to be able to live with both honesty and humility, to be a community that is open and inclusive, and that stands for justice. I believe that is exactly the kind of community that the world needs us to be. And the strength to be that kind of community, and that kind of people, is what Jesus is speaking to in our gospel reading for today.

There are four things Jesus says: 1. My sheep hear my voice. 2. I know them. 3. They follow me. 4. I give them eternal life. In those four statements, we hear the heart of Christian living, and from them we receive the strength to face whatever it is that life throws at us, while still keeping our balance, maintaining our bearings. I find that when I forget these things, that's when I begin to feel ground down by life. That's when I feel overwhelmed, or hopeless, or angry—which is when I start to become part of the problem. That's why I need to remember: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life. Four core truths—four life-giving truths—for us to live as God's people.

For us as Lutherans, we should be fully on board with the first core truth: "My sheep hear my voice." Everything begins with God's gracious call to us. It's never about us being worthy enough or deserving enough for God to notice us. It's always about God being merciful and forgiving. God calls us beloved children, precious in God's sight. God calls us forgiven and free from judgment, free from condemnation. Jesus calls us his own flock. We belong to him. So whenever that accusing part of our brain kicks into action, telling us we're not enough—we can answer that in God's sight, we are. We are beloved children of God. When we hear Jesus' voice, that's what we hear. Maybe you'll hear Jesus speaking to you today—through the words of scripture, or through the bread and wine of Holy Communion—saying, "You are my beloved child. You most certainly belong to my flock."

And Jesus' second life-giving truth is this: He says, "I know them." It's as if Jesus is saying to us, "I see you." And not in a threatening way—like, "I see you! Get your hand out of that cookie jar!" But, I see you. I see your heart. I see what you long for. I see your struggles, and the ways life has wounded you. I see your fears, and I also see how brave you can be. I see how you long for a world where there is justice and peace, where everyone has enough to eat. It would be unbearable to go through life feeling invisible, unseen, unknown. But God does know us, more deeply than we know ourselves. A friend of mine from New Mexico talked about what prayer meant to her. It was a time of silence in her busy, busy day to simply open her heart to God and

be known. I wonder where you feel most clearly that God sees you and knows you. Maybe it's here, in worship. Maybe it's when you take time for prayer, at the beginning or end of the day. Maybe it's when you're feeling particularly stressed, and you simply say, "God, help me." Or when you stop for just a minute to pay attention. We all need some time when we feel seen, when we feel known.

Jesus' third life-giving truth is about us. Jesus says that his sheep follow him. This isn't about believing in God or membership in a church. It's about following Jesus in his way of forgiveness and compassion. Everything Jesus says and does is all about this—we have been forgiven freely, as a gift, so that forgiveness can flow through us to others; God has reached out to us with compassion so that compassion can flow through our lives to others. Jesus loves us and calls us to follow him in his way of love, because that is how God is at work to heal and renew the whole human family. When we are learning from Jesus, we are learning compassion and forgiveness. We are learning gratitude and generosity. We are learning to love our enemies and work for reconciliation. We are learning how to create community that is open and hospitable for people who might be different from us. I believe this kind of following is profoundly important, given the splintering, division-producing challenges of our time. As Jesus' sheep, who hear his voice calling us his own, and who are known by him, as we then follow his way of love, we become a God-given gift of healing and wholeness for the world.

And finally, Jesus' fourth life-giving core truth is this: when we follow him, Jesus gives us eternal life. Note the present tense, not future. Jesus isn't talking about getting souls into heaven after this life is over. He's talking about a gift he gives now. The word for "eternal" is about a quality of life, not quantity. It's "abundant life." Jesus is talking about being fully alive—alive to the presence of God who knows us, alive to our deep connection to each other and to this world that is our home, alive to our true destiny and purpose in life, how God has gifted us to be part of God's work of healing for this wounded creation—which means to be alive to our own truest self.

To experience eternal life is to be awake to the wonder and beauty of life, to know it as a temporary gift, and to be grateful for it, rather than just plodding through life on autopilot. To experience eternal life is to know ourselves, not as the world would label us and package us, but as God knows us and loves us, as God forgives us and sees us as having immeasurable worth. Eternal life is that sort of life with God, which begins now and will be fulfilled in the life to come. And eternal life is what will carry us through the challenges and heartaches that life brings. Being connected to God who loves us and knows us, being connected to each other with compassion and forgiveness, being connected to the world and to our own destiny, our own self—this is what will carry us through, how we live into being deeply and truly alive.

The more we are sustained and protected by these four core, life-giving truths, the more free we will be, the more we will know peace and hope and joy—a joy no one can take away from us. There may be no escaping the randomness of life, the chance that when an accident or disaster strikes, it could strike us. That's not the kind of protection Jesus has in mind when he assures us that his sheep will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of his hand. Instead, being rooted in God's grace and love, being known by God and following in Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, so that we experience richness and joy of life, its eternal

quality—that's the only protection there is to prevent our hearts from being paralyzed by fear, or filled with bitterness, or overtaken by resentment and anger.

People of God, you are Jesus' beloved flock—God has called you and claimed you as beloved children. And God knows you, more deeply than you know yourself, and invites you to follow Jesus' way of forgiveness and love, and to experience eternal life. Those are the keys to being the kind of people, and the kind of community, we most want to be, and that our world needs us to be. For our part, we return each day to immerse ourselves in these beautiful, life-giving truths, to let our spirits be upheld and strengthened and sustained by them. Thanks be to God. Amen