

Easter 4—Year A
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Thieves and bandits, shepherds and sheep, gatekeepers and gates. Lots of images floating around today, and we can see *all* of these at work right now.

So many **sheep** *all over the world*. Those **yearning** for **guidance**. Those **in need** of **care and protection**. Those **in need** of **assistance**. Those **longing** to be **recognized for the human being** they are *instead* of a **statistic** in a **case count**, or **death count**, or **unemployment count**, or **high-risk population count**, or **out-of-school count**, or all the other ways we are **counting people** right now. So many **vulnerable sheep**.

So many **shepherds** *all the world over*. **Doctors, nurses, janitors, grocery store clerks, delivery people, morticians, scientists, leaders making hard decisions, mask-makers, encouragers, note-writers, ordinary people rolling up sleeves to feed their communities, people cheering one another with extraordinary acts of kindness and solidarity.** So many **good shepherds**.

So many **thieves and bandits**—they are *everywhere*. The virus for one, **stealing sheep away**.

But viruses don't have a conscience; they don't have a moral capacity; they are indiscriminate in their choices, just doing what viruses are made to do. Somehow, **its thievery isn't near as troubling** as the **human thieves and bandits** who *do* have a **moral compass** and **choose to ignore it**. Those who see this as a chance to **exploit vulnerable sheep**. **Price gouging on goods that are needed. Hoarding supplies in high demand. Profiting off of fear.** Finding the **cracks exposed by race and poverty** and **widening them to their benefit**. **Zoombombing those trying to connect with messages of hate. Twisting information to suit their agendas. Stoking fear and division. Grabbing power in vacuums. Grabbing as much of the financial pie as they can.** There are **many ways to steal and kill and destroy**, and **thieves and bandits will exploit them all**.

So many **gatekeepers**. Those who are **charged with decisions to open gates or close them**. Those who will give a **greenlight to thieves and bandits**, and those who will **do their best to protect the sheep, often at risk to their own power**. And the really tricky part, is sometimes **the gatekeeper needs to open the gate to let the sheep out of a sheepfold that has become sick**. No roadmap for the gatekeepers right now, except **listening, learning, anchoring in a deeper place, discerning wisely and in community**.

And then there's the **gate**. That's the *weirdest image of all* today, and that's the one that **Jesus chooses to claim for himself**. The **gate is the barrier between the vulnerable and the threats**, and **Jesus places himself in that no-man's land; Jesus places his body, his being, his psyche and spirit and mind, in-between our vulnerability and all that would steal it away**.

No threat will get to us *without coming through him first*, and *he will do what he always does*, absorb its force and drain it of its power. *Conversely*, before we come face-to-face with the threat, we will *pass through him*, and *as we pass through him*, we will take his power into our being and put on the mind of Christ, and faced with *that* wisdom and power and presence, the **thieves and bandits lose their power to steal and kill and destroy**.

Jesus said, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” That’s what Jesus wants for the sheep. That’s what Jesus wants for you and for me, that’s what Jesus wants for the most vulnerable, and in the big, big picture, that’s what *Jesus wants for the thieves and bandits, too*. Jesus wants *them* to put down their stealing, killing, destroying ways that they *also* might have life and have it abundantly.

So, on any given day, who are you?

In what ways are you **in touch with your vulnerability** and the **vulnerability of others**?

In what ways are you **shepherding others, calling them by name, recognizing their humanity, leading them to good, green pastures and still waters**?

In what ways are you **joining the ranks of thieves and bandits, giving into fear and division and scarcity, diminishing others’ humanity**?

In what ways are you a **gatekeeper practicing discernment, exercising your choice and agency for the common good**?

And how are you **allowing Jesus to be a gate in your life, allowing *him* to stand between you and whatever threatens you**? And, *as one in whom Christ lives and moves and has being*, how are you **allowing yourself to link arms and join him in that no-man’s land between safety and threat**?

Every moment of every day, we are faced with choices about the identities we will claim and where we will put our energy. Sometimes, life will make choices for us—there’s a lot of that going on right now—but even then, we get to choose where we will train our eye, to whom we will give our ear, to whom we will give our heart; even then, we get to choose what we will risk and for whom.

Throughout it all, there IS a good shepherd who’s also willing to be a gate. Stay close to him. He knows you by name; he knows you through and through, and he will lead you through this valley of the shadow of death. You don’t need to fear any evil.

Even in the presence of all that troubles us, he is spreading a table, anointing us with oil, anointing us for healing, consecrating us for service, filling our cup full and overflowing.

Goodness and mercy have got our back.

Follow the good shepherd, and he will lead you to that place where you are infinitely secure, and that security, that peace that passes all understanding, that security is the pearl of great price that the thieves and bandits can’t steal away. Amen.

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