

Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 3, 2020)

Year A RCL

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

“The Lord Is My Shepherd”

By: The Rev. Fr. Fabian Villalobos

Three weeks have already passed since we celebrated Easter Sunday, and as mentioned before this is a totally new and different Easter Season nonetheless holy. Social distancing, fear of contagion, the economy instability, the sorrow of those who have lost a family member or someone they know, the tireless work of health care workers, not to mention the many other realities have become the current state of living. However, this actual situation cannot define the identity for all humanity.

Something similar happens with the spiritual experience of our time in prayer, receiving any of the sacraments, an encounter or a moment of communion with God, reading the Bible, meditation, a song, etc., are all important parts of our spiritual journey. However, if they remain isolated and separated from one another, they become just moments of spiritual experiences. For sure they are beautiful, emotional, inspiring, motivational, and deep religious experiences with God, however they are only momentary. Time-passing

spaces of realities that are difficult to grasp only in one moment like when people visit a church for Easter and Christmas with family members or they visit a church to hear a particular preacher, choir or a musical band.

Instead of isolated spiritual experiences, if these single moments were connected, intentional, purposely part of our lives, and if there is discipline and sacrifice inasmuch as these moments require the freedom, will, involvement, emotional response, community engagement, and timely commitments, you will discover that these moments are transformed into patterns of behavior. A person who lives the spiritual experiences with discipline and regularity understands the farmer that trusts the earth to transform the seed to produce the crop.

As believers in Jesus, we need to strive to have and maintain an ongoing relationship with God that is fed and nurtured each day, rather than sporadic encounters with single spiritual experiences. The liturgy of the Church understands that the extraordinary spiritual moments are the exceptions not the norm. On this fourth week in the Easter Season the liturgy changes tone, no longer sharing the gospels of the resurrection; but in its place, we find in today's gospel from John chapter 10, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The description of what the shepherd does is clear, *“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.”* John 10:3-4.

In times of peace or pandemic, during the winter or the summer, the Shepherd works in the same way. Most all the days, the routine of what the shepherd and the flock do follows a pattern of actions with the same purpose always being the welfare of the flock. Only those who know the daily movements of the flock, understand the behaviors of the shepherd. Only those who have spent enough time with the shepherd will recognize his voice, and only those who follow and trust the shepherd will come to know the pastures of unknown places.

As I mentioned before, instead of isolated spiritual experiences, we need to have an ongoing relationship with God. We are Jesus' flock; our Shepherd continues calling each one of us by name in circumstances that only He understands. Among the many voices of despair or hopelessness, we need to develop the capacity to hear well, and recognize and obey the only voice that guarantees our access to eternal life.

When Mary Magdalen was outside the tomb crying and grieving, Jesus himself asked her, *“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”*, even

there, she is unable to recognize him. It was only when He called her by name, "Mary", that her eyes opened, her mind and spirit distinguished that it was Jesus, and she knew that her Lord and Master was there with her. The voice of Jesus calling her by name proved to Mary Magdalen that her vision was real, so she could confirm the identity of the person that was talking with her.

The same happens for Jesus' flock today, the Shepherd leads with His voice, His words have eternal life. He is present today, as He was in the past, and will be in the future. He continues being the same good leader that is willing to give His life to defend the flock; His love for the flock has no limits.

Recognizing Jesus' voice is our task, we are individually responsible to be trained and unequivocally familiar to know the Shepherd's voice.

Some people in the current pandemic situation might think or imagine that Jesus' voice is silent. Only those who have spent plenty time in the flock following Jesus understand that his voice is loud and clear. Jesus never leaves the flock alone. Jesus suffers with us and leads us because He was the first and will be the last to pass the journey of pain and sorrow.

Perhaps one of the obstacles for hearing Jesus' voice is obscured because of the presence of thieves and bandits. Jesus forewarns and denounces that the presence of those who harass and persecute the flock is real and present all

too often. During these 10 verses on 3 occasions, Jesus mentions those who want only to steal, kill, and destroy. They represent the major impediment for us to hear or follow Jesus.

After hearing and recognizing the shepherd's voice, the flock moves on in trust, like Mary Magdalen when she recognized Jesus. We follow Jesus fully aware that He knows the journey, wholly confident of His love for us, we follow after Him because He goes ahead of us, even carrying the cross. The flock moves forward because the shepherd takes them to places, they need to go. Some of these places are unknown, unpleasant, or difficult to pass, yet still the flock follows with firm steps, because of the constant love the Shepherd shows to them.

Jesus today mentions "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" In moments when life shows scarcity and seems strayed, and we feel as though we are missing the peace of Christ from the resurrection, the abundant life of Jesus is an excellent reminder that the Good Shepherd continues the journey with us for all time. Even if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need to trust God and keep going. Amen.

