

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009

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Today the scripture talks about Jesus as the good shepherd, which means you're sheep; each and every one of you, me too, you're sheep. But sheep are kinda smelly and kinda dumb and they just don't seem that smart, so I've always struggled with being a sheep until I saw wild sheep – ever seen wild sheep? I had to go to England to see them. I was a student for a year in college in northern England, in Lancaster, up near the Lake District. University of Lancaster is one of the new universities. It is literally set in a sheep pasture and if you forget that, when the wild shifts, you remember. Wild sheep are those that sort of skip out under the pen and live in the fields. They're natural, they're clean, and they're fun to watch. One time two friends and I were going to rock climb. Northern England is a great place to rock climb, especially when you're nineteen and invincible. There's this hillside where the grass was kept really close cropped by the sheep and out of that hillside was a spine of rock, a big cliff. It looked like the back of a dinosaur – you can just sort of imagine that dinosaur in there. A nice cliff – you could walk right up to it and climb and walk out. It is very civilized. So my two friends and I are walking toward the cliff when suddenly this man sort of walks diagonally – he's got his wellies on – you know the boots, he's got his coat, his sweater and we notice he's walking toward a sheep which was stuck up on the cliff – it seemed way up there. There was no obvious route down, the sheep was panicked and stuck. So the shepherd had noticed and walked quickly and briskly, called the sheep, the sheep's attention was then fixed right towards the shepherd. You could see the panic sort of settle and the shepherd talked this little sheep down off the cliff and then they walked away. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice and that bond was so deep and so complete that that sheep could explore; that sheep could get in trouble; that sheep could stretch and go further; that sheep could even get lost and the shepherd came and when the shepherd called the sheep recognized the shepherd's voice and was safe. He found his own way down off the cliff, an amazing sight. Today we hear scripture telling us that Jesus is the good shepherd and that we are to listen for his voice. So I ask you how tuned is your ear to the shepherd's voice? And where do you hear Jesus. Is the relationship that you have with Jesus strong enough that you can wander or do you need to stay in the pen because you're not sure? I wish we had included a few more words from the Book of Acts, because right after what we heard read today, right after that you hear some more about the authorities saying who are these people? Who are these Christians? They're not educated, but they're alive and they're wise. Part of hearing the shepherd's voice is practicing, listening. In fact that's a lot of what it is. It doesn't have to do with schooling. It has to do with practice – practicing hearing God's voice among the many voices that surround us. In our tradition, the Christian tradition, the eighty generations of Christianity – we call that discernment, don't we – discerning God's voice. There are many voices that tell us to do many things, but which voice is the good shepherd's? And how do we tune our ear to that? That's the question that scripture asks us and part of the reason we gather here as a community is to practice that listening so that our relationship with

Jesus is so strong that we can break our rules and go out and be one of those beautiful wild sheep that explores and experiments and gets lost and then is found again in that relationship because there you are safe. There you find your life. In this gospel, Jesus is not just the shepherd, he's also the gate. He's the way in and he invites you in through that relationship. So we tune our ear into Jesus and we practice that repeatedly because it doesn't have anything to do with brains. It has to do with the heart, a heart that is open and that only opens in relationship with each other as we seek a deeper relationship with Jesus. Now any time we consider sheep in the church we have to think about goats as well --- sheep and goats ---what's wrong with goats? You ever wonder about that? What's the problem with goats? If sheep are so great, why are goats so bad? I don't know. Some farmer can tell us. One time I was in Portugal on a bicycle trip and we stopped for lunch on a beautiful park-like plaza. It was nice and flat, but this was on a hillside, so on either side of this park were steep roads leading down to the coast and to the city center. It was a beautiful, peaceful park and we were enjoying a great lunch when all of a sudden we heard a cacophony of sound. Goat bells! Ever heard a goat herd coming at you? You can hear them before you can see them or smell them – and both of those are powerful. So this goatherd has a big stick – seems like it was about as tall as our paschal candle – so he has a big stick and he's pushing the goats -- they're in front of him. Goat herds go behind. Half the goats go down the steep hill; half of them scatter on to the park. The goatherd goes nuts and he runs up on to all the goats on the flat part and starts whacking them hard to get them down the hill to drive them forward. Goatherds drive the goats. Goats are willful. They sort of get absorbed in what they're doing. Imagine a seven year old or a seventeen year old or a twenty-seven year old or a seventy –seven year old – whatever—but just imagine that willful self-absorbed – not quite listening, too caught up. The goatherd comes and whacks right on the rear end. So if you're feeling like a goat. Maybe life keeps hitting you a little too hard; maybe it's time to go back to that ear of your heart, to that relationship with Jesus. The shepherd always goes ahead and we follow. The goatherd comes behind and whacks us on our back. If you getting whacked hard, open the ear of your heart, tune your ear again, deepen your spiritual practice so that you can re-connect with the shepherd, with Jesus, who is the gate to all abundance of life for each one of us as Christians. But beware; even as you strengthen that ear of your heart, there are no guarantees for wild sheep. It's not easy being a wild sheep and there's danger. One time a friend and I were driving through Scotland to the Isle of Skye. I'm sure some of you have been on that same ribbon of road that goes just out of sight to the ferry and we were racing the ferry. Have you ever done that? You know what time the last ferry is. If you miss it you're in the middle of nowhere over-night. You're driving pretty fast and you're watching the clock and you're trying to meet the ferry – that's what we were doing – we were driving fast down this long plain in western Scotland. Sheep were around us. There was one other car coming at us – this was at dusk -- so the lights were on but it was still in that in between time. One other car coming at us, almost slow motion right as we were about to pass, a sheep ran right in front of the car – a white blur. My friend screamed; I thought we were going to crash, but nothing happened and then we heard the sound – a thud. I turned right then and saw a sheep just sort of flying like a helicopter through the air. The other car had hit it and it crumbled on the side of the road instead. Being a wild sheep can be dangerous; we can go beyond being lost, we can get caught

up and sometimes when we look to the shepherd, to Jesus , we get a little lazy and we think that that shepherd will take care of everything; we'll never get sick; we'll never grow old, we'll never die; our children will always be perfect, but that's not how life is, is it? Jesus our shepherd promises to walk us through safely whatever may come, even as we live lives that are dangerous and difficult, so we take this Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday to re-anchor our hearts in Jesus in the relationship that gives us life, Jesus who always goes ahead. I pray that you may tune the ear of your heart anew, this springtime, this Easter Time to hear Jesus' voice again more deeply, more resiliently, with greater abundance of life.