

## Good Shepherds and Red Eggs

### Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 30, 2023

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

Sermon text: All who believed were together and had all things in common.  
Acts 2:44

On the menu this morning, a sermon sandwich: two images with a middle of biblical commentary, in this case the good shepherd, red eggs and creation care as a shared common good.

Let's start with the image of the good shepherd. The earliest preserved Christian art is found in the catacombs of Rome, in the catacombs of Priscilla and Domitilla and St Callisto, second and third century wall paintings of a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders, with other sheep by his side. In that of Priscilla there are also two trees growing on either side of Jesus, each with a bird nesting on top. The Good Shepherd—and the Paschal lamb—are early and deep metaphors for Jesus and the love of God for humanity, and all creation.

Psalm 23: God will guide us to green pastures and cool clean waters, protect and comfort us as we pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and recognize us as friends worthy of table fellowship and blessing. Our cup overfloweth with images from nature.

Note in this image of humans as a flock of sheep guided by a divine shepherd that we are bodily animals, not pure spirits in a cage of flesh. We live in a green world, with a need for water and in danger of predators, needing to stick together and follow our loving guide and protector, rather like small children following their teacher.

But just as children grow to be parents, so the human sheep are also potential shepherds, made in the image of the divine, with significant dominion over other animals, and therefore called to be not just followers but leaders and stewards of the natural order. But are we good or bad shepherds of what God has given us to care for?

Each of the many religious traditions that will join the sixth Blessing our Sacred Earth interfaith service on May 21 at Innisfree Garden (don't forget to reserve a spot) believe we have a sacred responsibility to care for the earth we have been given to take care of. Certainly it is clear in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is right in the beginning, Genesis 2:15: God tells Adam, protect and serve the earth

I have given you dominion over. Again in Genesis 10, after the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah—standing for humanity—and “every living creature” (Genesis 9:10)—the sign of which is the rainbow. Coming to the Christian New Testament and the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, we find in the longer ending of Mark Jesus telling the gathered disciples to “go out into all the world and proclaim the good news—the gospel—to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). And at the very end of the Christian Bible we come to the marriage of heaven and earth, a new creation and a restoration of the garden, now encompassed within the jeweled city in the center of which is the tree of life and the stream of the river of life—a melody of life and beauty. One sign of this new creation is a red egg. I will get back to this.

Given our charge to care for creation, how shall we respond to the climate crisis?

By holding up and building up common goods, common care, and common goals.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44).

Even the earliest church found it impossible to maintain the idealism of its first days—the picture of all the baptized sharing everything in common, selling all possessions and giving to all who have need. We find in Paul’s letters—earlier even that Luke, that sometimes the rich members held worship services in their houses—but to the services all baptized members were invited. We find condemnation of some eating while others hunger. We find Paul imploring those with much to share with those who have little—so that those with much do not have everything and those with little nothing. Circumstances change, tomorrow may be your turn to ask for help; today’s hurricane in Louisiana may be tomorrow’s flood in New York or fire in California.

So although inevitably there will be some inequality the common goods of water and land and air, of food and shelter must not be hoarded—for though wealth can indeed enhance resilience it will not create a separate world, an exclusive island planet for the rich. We are inescapably in this together, we live in a common world, one planet and one planet only. So we better get better about working together.

It will require some measure of sacrifice. But as the early church knew, even unjust persecution suffering and death can be borne with hope, found not only in faith in God but from the mutual aid of community. Common care. We cannot look at the suffering of some with indifference. All the lost sheep are taken care of in the kingdom of heaven.

With this faith and hope we look for the goal not only of preserving this current world but even of co-creating a new one, what Jesus called the kingdom of heaven on earth, what Paul called new creation.

It is this world, only better, It is Jesus Christ, still human but now resurrected. It is the hope of the world as it should be—of justice, peace and green beauty. It is a world of incredible diversity of species and cultures. It is a world of gardens and cities. It is beyond our generation, and perhaps hundreds of generations— but it is the hope that will keep us going forward toward that better future, step by step. It is the red egg—not only the white or brown ones we know but the one that demonstrates the gospel.

The story goes like this. After the encounter of the risen Christ with Mary Magdalene and the other disciples—after the beginning of the church—the apostles fanned out to spread the gospel—to the whole creation as mark has it. Somehow Mary ended up in the court of the emperor, bringing a token gift of an egg. She told him that Jesus the Messiah had risen from the dead, demonstrating that he was indeed the Son of God worthy to be worshipped. The emperor scoffed. Rising again from the dead—I would as soon believe that to be possible as that that egg in your hand suddenly turn red.

Well, here are two eggs. These were handed out at the end of the service at the Greek Orthodox cathedral in Istanbul Turkey on Orthodox Easter Sunday—which came this year a week later than ours. This is an Orthodox tradition—one that the west does not follow but which reaches us in the form of colored Easter eggs. The service also ends with people, mostly women, taking their baskets of bread and flowers out to the courtyard to be blessed by the bishop after the service. It is yet another sign how Easter is not just about overcoming death but bringing new and greater life to the world we live in now, the world we share, the world we are called to shepherd.

In the name of the Good Shepherd, Amen.

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