

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. AMEN.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

Have you ever felt like you had lost your way? Sometimes life takes a turn and suddenly the path beneath us isn't familiar. The light fades, the familiar landmarks disappear, and we wonder: Where am I? How did I get here? Maybe you're there now, in a shadowed place, asking for a way out. Maybe you've been searching for a voice to trust.

Many moons ago when I was deconstructing my fundamentalist faith, I was very lost and angry for a time. I carried my anger like a righteous armour for a number of years. Instead of judging those who were going to hell because they did not believe in my God, I was judging those who judged. My self-righteousness was alive and thriving. The "other" had merely changed. For years I couldn't go to my folk's church. I squirmed in discomfort and burned with anger. My pain was very real, all encompassing, and devastating. In this time of deconstruction, I no longer knew what I could believe about God. There was even a time when I did not see the point of living and longed for death. Thankfully this was a very brief time, maybe just a couple of months. But my despair was that deep. I felt like I was lost in the wilderness. But I was not alone! Through every step of that crucial journey, Jesus the shepherd was guiding me, even through the darkest valley! In moments like this, the familiar words of Psalm 23 becomes more than poetry. It becomes breath and life and hope.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” The word mercy here is the Hebrew word *hesed*. Not just pity. Not mercy as a distant favour. Not even just compassion. *Hesed* is God’s **steadfast** love, covenant faithfulness, unshakable kindness that refuses to let go.

It’s the kind of love that doesn’t just wait for you at the finish line, it follows you through every valley and shadow. You don’t have to earn this love. You don’t have to chase it. It follows you. It *pursues* you with intention and grace. Pope Francis in his profound book, *The Name of God is Mercy* writes that “the fragility of our era is this: we don’t believe there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy.... the **visceral** love of God’s mercy.”

And in John’s Gospel today, we meet the one who embodies that *hesed*. Jesus says: “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” He doesn’t just guide from ahead, he knows each sheep by name. He calls out, not to a faceless flock, but to each one of us, as if to say: “You are mine. I see you. I know what you’re carrying. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Jesus goes further: “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is not leadership from a distance, this is love that steps into danger, into death, to bring us back to life. This is what *hesed* looks like in the flesh: A shepherd who doesn’t run from the wolf. A shepherd who doesn’t abandon the lost. A shepherd whose love is stronger than death.

Then we hear again the words from later in John 10: “My sheep hear my voice. I **know** them, and they follow me.” This is more than just hearing—this is recognizing. Remember when Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name at the empty tomb? Immediately, she knew it was Jesus. That’s how the voice of Jesus sounds to the soul.

I’m going to take a teaching step sideways for a few moments. Because I can’t let Pearl read this passage from the Book of Revelation without unpacking it a bit. The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most violent story of the triumph of non-violence. It is super dense, full of complex imagery that is very difficult for modern readers to understand. John of Patmos takes Paul’s upside down and inside out theology of the cross and builds a scathing parody of the Pax Romana. He deliberately makes use of Roman and Hellenistic images of cultic worship and sacrifice in order to mock them. Contrary to the illusion of the might of the Roman Empire, it is the faithful witness of the Lamb and his followers who hold the power even in death.

Revelation 7:17, is one of the most stunning reversals in Scripture. “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life.” **The Lamb is the Shepherd.** The one who was led to the slaughter now leads. The one they attempted to shame now restores. The victim of empire now becomes the guide of the nations.

This is not just poetic. It’s theological subversion. It’s Revelation’s protest against a world that crowns the powerful and discards the wounded. The Lamb doesn’t conquer by taking lives, but by giving his own. In a world where the

strong rise by crushing the weak, here is a kingdom where the wounded one reigns. In your own suffering, whatever that looks like, this is the Shepherd who meets you: not triumphant in the world's terms, but faithful, wounded, and gloriously alive.

One of the things I was deconstructing all those years ago was this doctrine of substitutionary atonement, that Christ was sacrificed for our sins. You have heard me preach on this before. Christ's death on the cross was not a sacrifice to appease an angry and judgmental God. It was God's self in an unimaginable and radical act of solidarity with his creatures. Christ died because the world was deeply threatened by his message of love and prophetic calling out of the Romans and religious authorities. In death, he took on the suffering of the world, not as a sacrifice, but to suffer along side of us. All this talk of the blood of the lamb in the Book of Revelation is kinda hard to take. It is a cultic image, a parody. It may help to untangle this difficult imagery by substituting the word "blood" with "love." This is John's message. The **love** of the lamb conquers all. We are washed white as snow in the **love** of the lamb. The **love** of the lamb irrigates our wounds of sin and those inflicted on us by the sin of others.

The Lamb leads us not from above, but from beside. Not through domination, but through deep, faithful solidarity. When you are tired, when the world is harsh, when the sun scorches, and grief scorches more, we have this promise: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more...and God will wipe

away every tear from their eyes.” This is not future hope only. It is a present Shepherding.

Are you in a dark valley and need a way out? Can you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? It may come as comfort when your world is shaking. It may come as conviction when you've wandered too far. It may come as invitation, calling you toward something braver, deeper, holier. Is there something he's calling you to lay down, or something to take up? Is he calling you to trust again, even after disappointment? To follow him out of the fog and into the wide, open pastures of grace? Where is the Lamb leading you now? Maybe towards healing. Maybe towards courage. Maybe towards telling the truth. Maybe towards laying down the weapons you've used to protect your heart. The Good Shepherd is leading you into abundance! Jesus says: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Not a life free of valleys, but a life in which every valley becomes a place of holy companionship. A life where we are never forsaken, never unseen. A life where goodness and *hesed* are not things we chase, but gifts that pursue us.

Jesus ends this passage in our Gospel reading today with a promise that might be the most powerful of all: “No one will snatch them out of my hand. The Father and I are one.” So even if you're still unsure, even if your faith is shaky, know this: You are held; you are loved with *hesed*, love that will not quit; and you are being led by one who has walked through the darkest valley and come out the other side.

Alleluia Christ **is** Risen!

When you are weary, the Lamb will lead you to living water. When you feel forgotten, he will wipe every tear from your eyes. When the road is steep, the Lamb will walk with you, not just in front of you, but beside you. And when you don't know where you're going, remember: The Lamb who was slain is your Shepherd. And *hesed*, **steadfast** love, will follow you, **pursue** you, **enfold** you, all the days of your life. And you, precious, beloved, and held, shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.