

Fourth Sunday of Easter (a)
Acts 2:42-47 1 Peter 2:19-25 John 10:1-10
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
May 3, 2020 (Online Only, Corona Virus)

I'll never forget a nightmare I had when I was at home from college one summer. In the dream, I was out in a yard in the middle of the night, in front of a big mansion with huge windows. There were lights on inside, and I could see all these people who I loved inside. My dad and my mom (who had passed away), my stepmom and brothers and sisters, my best friends, my cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles...several of whom also had died. But they were all in there, very much alive, and there was a party going on. There was joyful music, everyone was smiling and happy and talking warmly with each other, and eating and drinking.

Of course my heart just about burst with emotion when I saw my mom, and all these people. I couldn't wait to get in there and join them. But I quickly found there was no front door to the house. Weird. So I walked around to the side of the mansion. And then to the back, and then to the other side. There were no doors to be found. The night was getting dark and cold. I could hear the music faintly playing inside the house, I could see all my loved ones' faces, in the warm glow of the firelight. But no matter how I jumped and yelled, they couldn't see me or hear me. And then, worst of all, it felt like time was passing; days, months, years. But I was out there in the cold night, missing everything.

And that's when, in reality, the door to my bedroom burst open and woke me up. My dad walked in, in his pjs, with what hair he had sticking straight out. He started singing Happy Birthday to me in his most obnoxious voice. It was my birthday. And I can't express the relief I felt, having dad there in the room with me after that nightmare.

I recalled that experience very vividly this week again, because in today's gospel, Jesus calls himself the door to the sheep. He is the gate through which we go in and come out. He's referring to how, back then, shepherds would bring their sheep into the fold at night to protect them from predators. Sheepfolds typically had rock walls, about five feet high, often covered with briars or prickly branches—an old version of barbed wire—to keep the mountain lions and wolves from trying to jump over them.

And we know that the door of a typical sheepfold in ancient Israel was about two feet wide. Very narrow. And they didn't build a wooden door, or pile up stones, to cover this narrow opening. The shepherd *himself* was the door to the sheepfold. At night, he would sleep there in the small opening of the rock wall. If any mountain lion approached, the shepherd would fight it off with his club or his long pointed staff. He was the door. It was a version of the old military strategy of purposely building a weak point into a city wall, so that the enemy would be drawn there. You could focus your defense in that spot.

So basically Jesus is saying: "I am the door into the Father's house. I am the door into the Father's family. I am the door through whom you pass, to go into the Father's safety. I am the door that opens you up to fullness of life. I am the door that opens for you into

banquet, the feast, the greatest party ever. I am the door in to the safety and security of the sheepfold.” And Jesus is also saying, of course, that he’s the door *out* to the green pastures and the abundant life and the feasting that goes on in those pastures outside. He’s the door that opens both ways. It’s not just a one-way door. This new life of going out and coming in becomes possible through him.

Usually when you think of a door, you think of an impersonal object that can be shut against you to keep you out. Jesus is not that kind of door. We carry our own spiritual doors with us when it comes to God. As sinners, we’re always going to be tempted to try and shut our door on God, and try to find our own life. God’s Word makes it clear that in the final judgment, the doors we keep closing on God throughout our lives can be closed forever from God’s side. A very real and frightening possibility. But the Easter proclamation is that Jesus is alive, inviting us through the door—through him—into that personal relationship with our Father. He’s the living door who invites us in: “Won’t you come in to my Father’s house? Won’t you come experience the Father’s love? Won’t you be part of my Father’s family? Won’t you come in to the banquet, the feast, the biggest party you have ever seen, into the Father’s eternity, which begins for you now?” And of course we need to remember: In today’s world he’s making that invitation through us—the church. We are the living doors who open ourselves up to make that personal invitation to people.

Jesus says he’s the door *in* to the sheepfold. God’s Church is the sheepfold, which means we live under God’s protection. And it means you and I as believers defend and protect each other. There will always be wolves and mountain lions that try to get in and break us off from a living relationship with Jesus. Break us away from that new family relationship we have with each other through him

Have you noticed how successful vampire and zombie movies have been in the last 15 years? Think of it: vampires live by sucking the life out of other people. Zombies are the walking dead. I am aware that these are fictional creatures. But I think you could argue that vampirism and zombie-ism are alive and well in the world today. When we’re separated from the Loving Father, the source who gives us life, we end up becoming parasites, sucking life out of other people. And along with that comes zombie-ism: there’s a numbness to life out there, a numbness to real beauty, a numbness to any greater meaning in life. It’s like the only things that can break through the shell of numbness are extreme violence, or sex or drugs. People escape into a computer fantasy life. Or they find meaning in extreme politics. That’s what people will feed on, just to feel alive. They’re always pushing out further into the extreme edges of life and finding more and more nothingness...because there’s nothing in the center of life, for them. Well, that’s why you and I are still here; God wants us to be there for people, to show and tell them what’s at the center.

As believers, we proclaim the source of life at the center of everyday life. He is a person—Jesus Christ. He loves us. He laid his life down for us. We do have to protect our faith because it’s under constant threat. And we protect each other from the wolves that lead us away from the sheepfold, where we hear the Easter message proclaimed.

But remember too: Jesus says he's also the door that opens *out* to the wide pastures. The whole point of playing good defense is so we can follow him *out* through the gate and launch a powerful offensive into the world. You think of Psalm 23, where it says the Lord is leading us out into the green pastures, by the still waters. Isn't it amazing how this Psalm, which has given countless millions of people so much comfort through the centuries, is actually a psalm about going out into the world. The Psalm pictures our shepherd leading us *through* the valley of the shadow of death, not keeping us from it. And he's not feeding us a heavenly meal in a safe place: No, the Psalm says he's preparing a heavenly feast for us *in the presence of* those who would destroy us. All those images in the Psalm show us walking confidently out into the world, beyond the sheepfold. Our Shepherd says He'll show us the way and give us what we need not as we hunker down and play defense, but *as we travel*. Because He lives with us, we can go out into the world and live and share our lives, our resources, and our faith...and we can face all the devils and wolves of our time, with confidence. Jesus is the door into God's family, and he's our door out into the world as confident, joyful believers who shine his light wherever we go.

I think of that terrible nightmare about the mansion with no doors. I wonder what kind of fears I was carrying around with me during that time in my life, to have that nightmare? How was I cutting myself off from that beautiful reality God had given me—the mansion full of all the people? How was I closing my spiritual door on life and on God? How was I trying to have my own life, without the relationship with God on which all life is based? It's always our weakness, our constant temptation as sinners, to close the doors and go it alone. I think of how thankful I was when my dad, so very real, and so very physical, opened that door and came into the room, and woke me up from the nightmare to sing me happy birthday.

Through sending Jesus Christ—think of it—that's a lot like how our Father in heaven wakes us up every day.