

Fourth Sunday of Easter Christ Church 2024

The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.

I think if you ask Christians of different denominations to identify **a psalm** that speaks to them, a psalm that is familiar, psalm twenty-three will probably make it close to the top.

This psalm is one of the favorites for funerals. It is also used during Easter season **on every fourth** Sunday of Easter.

I understand why it is the favorite psalm for funerals. It is comforting and reassuring. In the midst of grief or sorrow and hopelessness, the psalmist reminds us that **we are not alone**; the good shepherd **walks** with us in our grief.

And there is a good reason the same psalm is used on every 4th Sunday of Easter. The core message of Easter is that **there is life after death**. Jesus died and rose from the dead and because of his resurrection, we too will be raised from the dead.

On Easter Sunday the focus of our celebration is the resurrection of Jesus. Yes, Easter is about Jesus being raised from the dead. But it is important to remember that Jesus was raised from the dead in order for us to be accorded the same resurrection.

That is why in these seven weeks in the Easter season we continue to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. But also, we celebrate our own resurrection.

The lesson from the Acts of the apostles points out that resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus, resurrection is something that happens to the followers of Jesus too. We are also reminded that resurrection is not something that will only **happen in the future**. We are called to live resurrected lives today and every day.

Like God's kingdom that is here but not yet, is lived and built on a daily basis, so also, the glorious resurrection will happen at the end of time, but it is lived out daily by us who are still alive. Easter seasons call each one of us to live resurrected lives.

In the Gospel from John, Jesus repeats the image of the good shepherd and states that those who believe in him will have eternal life. We believe that by his resurrection on Easter morning, **Christ has given us new life (1 Peter 1:3)**. This new life is not in the future. The new life accorded to us, is today and is lived out daily.

Yes, the core message of Easter is that there is life after death. And that life after death begins now.

But what does eternal life after death mean for you? Do you even think about life after death? Do we even believe in the life after death? And most importantly what does it mean to live a resurrected life today.

In my ministry as clergy, I often find myself at the bedsides of those who are about to depart from this world. **This is a privilege that I don't take lightly.** Sometimes we sit there in sacred silence. No words spoken.

I once visited a patient who asked me to sing hymns with her. We sung some of her favorite hymns. A few hours later she passed away.

My hope is always to be an instrument of hope and peace to the individual.

During such sacred visits, I offer prayers, and holy communion. I anoint them with oil.

Yet, the question of life after death comes up from time to time. Yes, the individual knows they are going home. Most of them are ready to go home. They have been faithful and dedicated to their faith. They have lived a resurrected life while they were alive. But this does not negate the desire to know and wonder; **What will happen, after I take my last breath.**

Two years ago, I visited with a parishioner who was in his last hours of life. He was in the process of entering hospice care. He had requested all medical interventions to be discontinued. He knew he was going "home" soon. We prayed together. He received communion and he was anointed.

As I was about to say my goodbyes, in his weakened voice he turned toward me and asked; "**what happens after I take my last breath?**"

I take seriously such deep questions of faith. To me such questions provide an opportunity for faith sharing. The question about life after death

is not about theological debate. This is not a time to quote a philosopher or a famous theologian. This is not even the time to quote bible verses. For me, this is a sacred moment to share my faith with the individual.

I don't know what happens when we take our last breath; It is a holy mystery. A mystery I find hard to explain or even understand. It is a sacred mystery, and I am comfortable with it. It is a mystery I hold to be real and true.

What I know is that I follow a good shepherd. A shepherd that I trust when he says: I am the bread of life, whoever believes in me shall not die but will have eternal life. I trust in the good shepherd who deeply knows me. A shepherd who said: "I know my own and my own know me"

I follow a good shepherd who knows me more than a mother knows her child. Some of us can remember that when we were children our mother or father could figure out what we were doing. It was a puzzle to us when Mom or Dad could anticipate what kind of trouble we were going to get into. The good shepherd knows even more than mom and dad. I trust in the good shepherd who knows me deeply and yet loves me.

Our faith in life after death is anchored on **our trust** in the good shepherd. We have tasted his love and mercy. We know truth when we see it. "I know my own **and my own know me**, Jesus said. We know him because we belong to his flock.

Yes, we know Jesus. We know love when we encounter it. We know him **though** we struggle for words to describe him. We know him. He is trustworthy. When he tells us that he died and rose from the dead in order to bring us back to his father, we can rest assured without physical proof, that yes, it is true. There is life after death. **Death is not the end but the beginning of a new glorified life.**

Just like the resurrection of Jesus was difficult to put in words, life after death is only understandable through faith in Jesus Christ. It is in believing in the promises that God in Jesus made, that we become enlightened, and our questions answered.

After both of us had shared our faith in that hospital room, our friend turned and looked at his daughter who was in the room. His face lit up and he smiled and said, I believe! I trust in the good shepherd. He wanted his daughter who was next to him to know that he will be okay.

Indeed, this is our faith. I get it now why we use psalm twenty-three during the Easter season. We believe in life after our last breath because we trust the good shepherd. **It is the good shepherd that will show us how to live resurrected lives.**

Let us open our hearts and eyes of faith and listen to the good Shephard. His voice can be heard by those who belong to his flock. Listen to his voice

and your doubts and questions will be answered. Listen to his voice and he will tell you how to live a resurrected life. **Amen**