

17 April 2005
Easter 4 – Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Door is Open Again”

Text: John 10:1-10 (Psalm 23; Acts 6-7; 1 Peter 2)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said: ***“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”***

It is usual to take these words of Jesus and apply them to modern day life; to what we see and hear happening around us today. And that is not at all inappropriate, for there are many thieves and robbers in our world today, seeking to rob Christ’s Church of His sheep; seeking to deceive us and mislead us; seeking to get us to follow them and *their* promises for real and abundant life. I could list many examples; and I’m sure you could too.

But I don’t want to do that today. Instead, I want to go in the *opposite* direction. Instead of taking these words of Jesus and moving them *forward* in time and applying them to our situation today, I want to take them and move them *back* in time. I want to apply them to the situation all people of all time have been in since the very beginning. I want to apply them not only to the *current manifestation* of thieves and robbers that happen to be in our world today, but to the thief and robber that has been attacking Christ’s Church since the very beginning. And that, I think, will give us a greater appreciation for these words. For the greater the sin, the greater the salvation. The greater the enemy, the greater the Saviour. The greater the problem, the greater the triumph.

And so what happened at the beginning? You know. The thief named Satan had come, and he stole and killed and destroyed. He stole our innocence; he killed our parents; and he destroyed Paradise. By sin. And after Adam and Eve sinned, they could no longer stay in the Garden of Eden. They were kicked out of Paradise. No longer would they have all that they wanted, and a peaceful, abundant life. Now they would have to toil and struggle and live in the wilderness of sin. And as they did, you could be sure that they longed for what they had. That they looked back longingly to what they had – in foolishness – forfeited. ***But they could not go back in. The door had been shut.*** And to

even *try* to re-enter meant sure and certain death. For as we hear from Genesis: ***“Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”*** (Genesis 3:22-24)

The thief had come and done his work. His wretched, miserable, destroying, life-stealing work. His work that not only stole life from Adam and Eve, but from you and me too. Because of sin, the door to life, abundant and eternal, is shut tight. To all. . . . But now, Jesus says, I have come to *open* the door again. I have come, indeed, to be the door. The door, that Paradise may be opened again. So that life may be given again.

The problem, as we heard though, is that any man who tried to go through that door would be killed. Sinful man cannot eat of the tree of life and live forever in sin. And so when Jesus says that He is the door, He knows full well what that means. He knows full well that when He, as a man, bearing our sins, goes to that door, that portal between Heaven and earth, between God and man, between wilderness and Paradise, it will mean His life. The flaming sword of God’s justice will fall upon Him. He knows full well, and that’s why He goes. To take it. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. And so suspended on the cross between God and man, He becomes the door. The door to Paradise that we would not have, if He did not open the way for us.

And so when Jesus says, ***“I am the door”*** this is what He means! He is not speaking of earthly things, but of His death and resurrection – the death it took to re-enter Paradise, and the life on the other side He gives through His resurrection. **He is the door**, for there are not many doors, but one door. **He is the door**, for all other doors are really no doors at all, but are thieves’ doors – false doors – and lead only into the flaming sword of God’s justice and judgment, and therefore to death. But **He is the door**, for only in Him and through Him is the entrance to Paradise, and to life, abundant and eternal. And entering in Him, we not only are saved and find pasture, we are the sheep of the Twenty-third Psalm. Sheep restored to Eden. Without want. Lying in green pastures. Beside still waters. Our souls restored. Walking in the paths of righteousness. Our heads anointed with oil. A rich feast prepared at His Table. And dwelling there *forever*, in confidence and forgiveness, never having to fear expulsion again.

And that door is here for you! It is not far off and hard to find. It is not secret or something you must find on your own effort. It is here, for your Saviour and Shepherd are here for you. Even though, as we heard from Peter, we often are like *straying sheep*,

leaving our Saviour and following our own ways; in His Word our Shepherd is calling to us, calling us back, calling us to follow Him. **And His sheep know His voice.** Even though we are *sheep who love to wander*, following the allurements of our eyes and getting lost in the wilderness of sin and temptation, our Shepherd leads us back to the quiet waters of our baptism, to confess our sins and drink deeply of His absolution, **and the gatekeeper, the Holy Spirit, opens the doors of our hearts and the door of Paradise.** And even though we are *sheep who now live in the midst of many and great dangers*, in a world full of sin and evil, and with hearts full of sin and evil, our Shepherd prepares His Table for us here in the midst of our enemies. And even though we do not live in Paradise yet, **our Saviour brings the fruit of the new Tree of Life out to us here**, as we eat and drink His body and blood. And in these we have life, for in these He gives us His life.

And as we eat and drink His body and blood, as our Shepherd continues to give His life to His sheep, the cherubim that once *guarded* the door to Paradise are here too – only no longer with the flaming sword of God’s justice, but now singing the praises of our Saviour, who opened Paradise again! For as we hear each week, we gather here with the *angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven*. And it’s true! They are here with us, because here for us, is the door. They on the one side, we on the other, all united around our Saviour, who is here for us. **And the door is open**, for the tomb is open. For if the tomb is open, death is defeated. If the tomb is open, Satan is defeated. If the tomb is open, our sin is defeated! And if the tomb is open, then Paradise is open again.

That is what Stephen saw as he testified to the Jews about Jesus. He saw Heaven open. He saw the door to Paradise open wide. Those without faith in Jesus could see no such thing, for to them the door is shut. But to all who by faith are in Christ Jesus, the door is open. His sheep hear His voice, they know Him, and they follow Him. And you will follow – not only in this life, but even into the next. For that is the goal of your Shepherd – not only life now, but life eternal. And so while our life now may be a struggle – living in the midst of enemies, struggling against sin and doubt, wandering through the valley of the shadow of death – we do not fear. ***“For Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”***

For we have a Good Shepherd. A Good Shepherd who was not content to simply help us make the best of our lives here and now, in the wilderness – but who will accept nothing less than leading us back into Paradise. To lead us through His body as the door, for in Him we are safe; in Him we are forgiven; in Him the justice of God has been executed, and now there is life. And when you, like Stephen, fall asleep in death, it is this door that you will see, opened wide. The door to Paradise. And you will go in, and ***dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.