

## The Fourth Sunday of Easter

*St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023*

*Acts 2:22-27*

*1 Peter 2:19-25*

*John 10:1-10*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

The cat has a new enemy. Over the winter our next-door neighbours acquired a kitten, and now that the weather is warming up a bit our ancient rescue cat, Esther, has started venturing out into the garden again, shrugging off just a bit of the indolence that has characterised her winter. But as she re-emerged into the fresh air she encountered this new kitten mooching about on her territory. And it has not gone well. They are not friends. So Emma and I have spent a little while going back around the boundary of our property plugging up the gaps in the fences to make sure that Esther doesn't do herself a damage trying to vault over something that 12 years ago would have been easy, but now would probably cause her to come a cropper, and also trying to discourage this new kitten from wandering into the fairly toothless and arthritic but nonetheless surprisingly aggressive lion's den.

With Esther it is all about securing the boundaries, to keep her and this new kitten safe.

Today is often known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. For the last 20 years or so Holy Mother Church has given us, on the fourth Sunday of Easter season, a section of Chapter 10 of John's Gospel. Pretty much the whole chapter is about boundaries and fences, about sheep and shepherds. The really famous bit is the

bit we will read this time next year, which is the section where Jesus actually says, 'I am the good shepherd'. Which is of course the bit that connects firmly with our second reading, where God is referred to as the 'Shepherd and Guardian of our souls', from whom we had gone astray like a chaotic bunch of sheep who have now been regathered into flock moving somewhere together.

Today's gospel reading is from a handful of verses earlier in the same chapter, and what's interesting is that in these earlier verses Jesus doesn't only describe himself as the Shepherd, though he does do that obliquely. He also describes himself as the gate. 'I am the gate for the sheep'.

What we're doing through the whole of this Easter season, what the Church is giving us through this season, are reminders of what it means to be the family of the resurrection. If what happened at Easter really did happen at Easter, what does that make us? What shape of people are we? How does something that happened two-thousand-odd years ago in a Palestinian garden make my soul, make your soul, different?

So for the first couple weeks we hear the stories. Obviously the resurrection accounts themselves. Then the story of the upper room, with Thomas poking at the nail holes. And then last week the story of the travellers on the road to Emmaus, and the breaking of the bread. And those of us who were here last week had that wonderful gift from Robert of the reminder that we are dealing with a God who has 'a fine disregard for the rules.' Do you remember that? This is a God who is simply not particularly interested in conforming, and conformity. Things are going to be different.

And this week we move into some slightly more metaphorical and less concrete gospel readings, and what they are doing - and all of them between now and Ascension Day will come from this section of St John's gospel - what they are doing is adding layers of understanding to the resurrection story. If you like they are giving us the 'so what does that actually mean.' Layer by layer we start to understand who we are as we blink in the new light of Easter at the door of the empty tomb.

And this morning's Gospel reading gives us this beautiful and carefully presented image of the Easter family. Jesus tells us that we are a flock who live in a sheepfold. We are a specific people. And thinking about that can be quite tricky these days, in a pluralist and quite properly multicultural society. But one of the things that Jesus wants to say is that we are distinct. You should be able to tell Christian people apart. And partly that's about our behaviour: the reading from the Acts this morning gives us some of the key markers of Christ's people: 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' Which is precisely what we do here pretty much every Sunday morning. We come together in fellowship, we break bread, and we pray. This has always been what Christians do. And out of that comes charity, concern for our neighbour, and yes also growth, often.

There is something distinct about us. And we are to be attentive to the voice of our Shepherd, and to guard against the thief and the bandit, the one who climbs in over the wall rather than coming into the gate.

But we are not to be defensive. We are not to be penned in. This is not Tom and Emma defending their ancient cat from harm by plugging every hole in the fence. When the church is in crisis, and I would argue that we are in crisis at the moment, the

temptation is always to pull our arms and legs in like a tortoise. To pull up the drawbridge and defend the walls. To plug the gaps in the fence.

Not so, says Christ. I am the *gate*. I'm not only the Shepherd, I am the *gate*. And interestingly, our Lord doesn't say 'I lead them in', but 'I lead them *out*'. And then later on, 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in *and go out*, and find pasture.'

The sheepfold is important. It defines the flock. It protects them from the thief and the bandit. But only so that the flock can then go out through the gate and pasture. Because in this image the lush green grass is outside the sheepfold, and so we go out through the gate, through Christ, to where nourishment is. And that outward motion, the family, the flock, that is ready to move out through the gate into the open, is the family that is doing the mission of God. We talk about the operation of the Holy Spirit don't we, in terms of centrifugal motion, starting in Jerusalem and then going out to the surrounding towns and villages, out to the surrounding nations, and to the ends of the world. 'I am the gate', says Christ. The gate through which you must be ready to go out as well as come in through. This is the language of mission. And as we move deeper into Eastertide, of course we get closer and closer to Pentecost. To Whitsunday. So we see that our understanding of our identity as resurrection people is pneumatological. That's a long word. We see that our understanding of our identity as resurrection people is 'Holy Spirit'. Is a garden with gaps in its fence. Is a sheepfold with a gate, whose name is Christ. And we move in both directions through that gate, in, for fellowship, for the breaking of the bread and the prayers, to reconstitute ourselves every week, to feel our identity as Easter people, and out towards the lush pastures, blown by the winds of the Spirit.

St Gregory the Great said this: ‘consider, brothers and sisters, your own situation. See whether you are indeed his sheep. This knowledge is had not through faith but through love, not through belief but through action.’ This is hyperbole - faith and belief are of course really important. But we feel our identity through love and through action. We love Christ by trusting that the gate leads to somewhere good, and our action is to walk through it.

We’ve not got a bad start here at St Thomas’s, because our door is made of glass. We do have to do more than look through it. We need to feel our identity, trust our Shepherd, and walk out through the door.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**