**Weekend of Sunday, April 21, 2024**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Acts 4:5-12**

**Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**

**Processional Gospel Reading: John 10:11-18**

**Sermon Title: *“The Good Shepherd's Sacrificial Love: A Call to Radical Love and Witness”***

**Theme**

*The image of the good shepherd shows us how the risen Christ brings us to life. It is the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep, one of mutual knowledge and love, that gives the shepherd authority. The shepherd’s willingness to lay down his life for the sheep shows his love. First John illustrates what it means to lay down our lives for one another by the example of sharing our wealth with any sibling in need.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 4:5-12**

5The next day [the] rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is
 ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
  it has become the cornerstone.’
12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

**Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**

16We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?
 18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.
 23And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**Gospel: John 10:11-18**

 [Jesus said:] 11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

**Sermon**

As we gather on this blessed Fourth Sunday of Easter, we are reminded of the profound love that our Savior, Jesus Christ, has demonstrated for us. Easter is not just a single day of celebration but a season of reflection, renewal, and rejoicing in the resurrection power of our Lord. Today, we delve into the heart of Easter through the scriptures we have been provided. Let us journey together into the depths of God's love, grace, and mercy revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and may our hearts be stirred to respond with radical love and unwavering witness.

*But first, an Easter interruption: What do you call an Easter Bunny who gets kicked out of school? Egg-spelled.*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He contrasts Himself with the hired hand who flees when danger arises, emphasizing His deep commitment and sacrificial love for His flock. Jesus says,

11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And indeed his words were met with action. Jesus' declaration echoes throughout the ages, resonating with the sacrificial love that He demonstrated on the cross. His death was not a tragic accident but a deliberate act of love, fulfilling the Father's redemptive plan for humanity. He willingly endured the agony of the cross, bearing the weight of our sin and shame, so that we might be reconciled to God and receive the gift of eternal life.

Allow me to repeat that: Jesus Christ our Lord, willingly endured the agony of the cross, bearing the weight of our sin and shame, so that we might be reconciled to God and receive the gift of eternal life. Friends, this is the good news! You have been forgiven. Leave your sin and guilt at the cross – it is no longer yours. You no longer have any reason to hide from God who is jealous of your attention. Seek Him; He wants to be found by you.

As we meditate on the Good Shepherd's sacrificial love, we should be filled with awe and gratitude for the depth of His devotion. He knows each of us by name, and he willingly laid down His life to rescue us from sin and death. This love is not abstract or distant but intensely personal and intimate, reaching into the depths of our souls and transforming us from the inside out. I hope that each of us seeks that kind of transformation – that out of our awe and gratitude, each of us wants to become more like Him who is our example of godly living.

*This is a good place for an Easter interruption: Where does the Easter Bunny get his eggs? From an eggplant.*

Our Second Reading comes from the First Letter of the Apostle John. In this reading, the apostle urges us to emulate the sacrificial love of Christ in our own lives, laying down our lives for one another. John writes:

16We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

If you think this sounds extreme, I would agree with you. John’s point is that true love for each other is not merely a sentiment or emotion but a tangible expression of selflessness and sacrifice.

John challenges us to move beyond empty words and hollow gestures, calling us to love in action and truth when he writes:

18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Our love for others is to be characterized by deeds of compassion, generosity, and service, reflecting the love that Christ has lavished upon us.

On Thursday, we hosted an RC Blood Drawing. Many of our members did as the RC says, “Give the gift of life.” Hardly an inconvenience to us, but quite literally life-saving to those who need it.

Thursday was also our Drive-Through dinner day and members of this church delivered X meals to our homebound free of charge.

Saturday morning was Zion’s monthly Food Distribution day. Many of you helped in various ways, as you were able, to relieve the hunger and suffering in our client’s lives.

These are just some of the ways we demonstrate the compassion and generosity John writes about. And that was just one week! It has been my experience and the experience of many of you, that when we get outside ourselves and help another, we are helped too.

In this Easter season, may our love be a beacon of hope shining brightly into a world that is often darkened by hatred and division and characterized by selfishness and lack of concern for others. Let us seek out opportunities to extend grace to the marginalized, to offer forgiveness to the repentant, and to bear one another's burdens in love. As we do so, we bear witness to the transformative power of Christ's love and the reality of His resurrection in our midst.

*One last Easter interruption for today: What do you do when you eat all your chocolate Easter candy? Give Peeps a chance.*

In the early days of the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit freshly given to them, Peter and John boldly proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ as the source of healing and salvation. Faced with opposition from religious leaders, they fearlessly declared,

12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

This proclamation remains as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. In a world that offers countless false paths to fulfillment and salvation, this congregation boldly declares that Jesus Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the Good Shepherd who leads us out of darkness into His marvelous light, the sacrificial Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

You know, this congregation is blessed to have visitors in attendance almost every week. There are any number of reasons why they might be with us on any given weekend. Why they are here is not as important as what we should pray they experience when they are here. It has been my tradition to begin our worship services by proclaiming, “The name of Jesus is spoken here!” I promise you, that you and our visitors will hear words of love, grace, and mercy because that is who Jesus is. I want to challenge each of you to make the words visitors hear, a reality, by being the warm, charming, welcoming people that I know you to be.

As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, let us lift high the name of Jesus, proclaiming His victory over sin and death to all who will listen. May our lives bear witness to the transformative power of His love, and may we point others to the hope that is found in Him alone.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we conclude our time together today, let us carry the message of Easter with us into the world. Let us be like the Good Shepherd, laying down our lives for one another in love. Let us emulate the example of the early disciples, boldly proclaiming the name of Jesus as the only hope for a broken and hurting world.

May the sacrificial love of Christ compel us to action, and may the power of His resurrection infuse us with courage and boldness. As we go forth from this place, may we be agents of transformation and reconciliation, shining as lights in the darkness demonstrating radical love, and, pointing others to the love that knows no bounds.

**Prayer**

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have shown us the meaning of love through Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us. Send your Holy Spirit to inspire us to share Christ’s love by giving our lives for one another, to the glory of your holy name. Amen