

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 29.iv.2007, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania
Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30
Reception of New Members by Restoration, Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ☩ Amen.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, a name that makes sense given the proper readings from the Bible appointed for this Fourth Sunday of Easter, an image of Our Lord and of our relationship with Him that is also expressed in the hymns for our prayerful use today. If this church were ever to be renamed, based on the artwork always before our eyes in the Altar Reredos, it might well be called 'Church of the Good Shepherd.' It is usual on this Sunday to focus attention on the

crucified and risen Christ as true Shepherd, as true and first Pastor of the Church as His flock. Today I would like to shift our focus a bit from the Shepherd to the sheep and what it means to be and to belong to the flock of Jesus Christ. I want to do this especially because we have three Christians among us this morning who, after prayerful consideration, have decided that that is what they are determined to do in this congregation. We will gather around them in prayer as we confess our faith with them and renew our own promises to the Father through the Son, promises which we all will be able to keep by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

What did it mean for the first Christians to belong to the flock of Christ, to have Christ as the

Shepherd of their souls? What does it mean for us? To answer this, it may help to keep today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles in mind, the raising of Tabitha or Dorcas from the dead by the Apostle Peter.

Peter, otherwise a nobody fisherman from Galilee, moves through the earliest Christian community at Jerusalem with a sovereign authority. As Saint Luke tells the story of the Jerusalem Church, the community of believers there really forms around Peter and the other Apostles from Easter to the Ascension to Pentecost. They represent the life and power and Word of the Risen Christ among the believers, and the believers turn to the Apostles as their pastors, as their shepherds, in the stead of Christ. In a very real sense,

the Apostles both found and form the Church, with others responding, forming communities of faith, congregations, around their Apostolic Ministry. The *response* to the Apostles was crucially important in the earliest Church. The *response* to the Apostolic ministry today is equally important.

Just as Jesus raised Lazarus, so Peter now raises Dorcas. There is a touching scene of grief in the home at Joppa as Peter is shown Dorcas' needlework, just as grief over Lazarus was there to greet Jesus on His arrival at His friend's home in Bethany. And, just as Jesus was not prevented from raising Lazarus, so, too, Peter is not prevented from raising Dorcas, though no one apparently expected either miracle. Peter, as one *sent* by Jesus, as an *Apostle*, is permitted

to do works of power through the grace of God and to preach that grace with power.

That, it seems to me, is what being a member of the flock of Christ is all about. It is not about growing wool, or about being passive or dumb as sheep are supposed by all but shepherds and sheep dogs to be. It is about looking to the Apostolic Ministry of the Church and *permitting* that ministry to minister for the sake of Christ.

The very first day I arrived in my very first call at Faith Lutheran Church in Sault Ste. Marie, Canon George of the neighboring Saint James Episcopal Church dropped by to welcome me and to ask if I needed anything. As a matter of fact I did. I needed some vestments for the coming Sunday, because the

ones I purchased with my Ordination gifts were still being made. That was no problem, and the fit was good and ample because Canon George is about a head taller than I am. With that help came the first of many tidbits of brotherly advice. "Guy," he said in an elongated way, like a pitcher winding up to throw, letting me know I had better be ready to catch, "we Anglicans like to say that, just like the rubrics in the liturgy, there are two kinds of ministry. Those are *indicative*, what you have to do and what the people have to let you do, and *permissive*, what you very much need and want to do for people, but what they must *permit* you to do by opening their hearts to you." I understood, and I still do.

But I understand something else, too, and that is that it is *Christ Our Lord* Who establishes and wills this ministry of binding and loosing, this ministry of teaching and of preaching, this ministry of empathy and of simply bearing burdens with others, this ministry of proclaiming hope and calling to new life in the Name of Him Who died that we might live with Him forever. This decision to respond to the Church's ministry one's whole life through, or, after seasons of forgetfulness or even irritation and impatience, to *remember* our Baptism and the One into Whom we are Baptized, to *remember* Who the real host is Who invites us to the Lord's Supper and Who the real Pastor and Shepherd of the Church is, and to *return* to the Apostolic ministry of the Church

regardless of how the pastor called to this place in His stead at any given time may or may not reflect the Good Shepherd's love and wisdom and courage, *that* is how the Church is established and how the Church lives in this or any place, and *that* is how the Church and *this* church will endure.

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠Amen.

S. D. G.!