

“Life Laid Down” (25Apr21)

John10:11-18; 1John3:16-24; Acts4:5-12

Alleluia! Christ is risen! We keep saying and rejoicing in that Easter message, even though it seems we’re getting away from it.

Today our Gospel reading goes back before Easter, before the surprise happy ending of Jesus rising from the dead. Instead, this is not even half way through the book of John. Jesus is chatting about agricultural practices, animal husbandry, what it is to be a good kind of farmer or—more directly—the good shepherd. Intern Lisa reminded us last week that resurrection is of the body, in the flesh, real life that eats fish. Still, this today seems like the stuff of regular life and not an Easter story.

Along with this, I’m also thinking about chilly Wednesday evening around the memorial garden. It may be our best place to remember resurrection. But this was the first face-to-face Confirmation gathering of 7th and 8th graders this entire year.

Besides the chance to see each other, they were talking about presentations they and their mentors will make for you next week after worship. They were told their presentations should reflect on faith, but Emilia Malecki pointed out they haven’t had a real class all year to learn about faith. So Pastor Sonja asked what sorts of things they might say anyway. Martha Wildman said we trust that God is loving and God is with us. Tyler McGown immediately plunged into the deep end of theology, asking, “If God is loving, then why did God make the coronavirus?” Wow! I can’t answer, though it’s worth speculating.

One way comes through our Gospel reading. Martha says God is with us, God is loving. That fits well with Jesus saying he cares for the sheep, all of the sheep, even other sheep we don’t really know about. He wants life for the sheep, in spite of lurking harm.

But then Tyler asks, what about the virus? If God is so caring, how does God relate to the harm and death and the terrible disruptions from life, including the forms that our middle schoolers were sharing, of longing to be in school, of missing

sports, of not seeing friends. Heck, they even miss Confirmation! Shouldn’t God want to do something about those things, at the very least getting them back to Confirmation?!

We could take the Easter promise to say it doesn’t matter in the end that COVID19 has caused so much damage—whether we can recover from it or it seems irreparable—because there is resurrection. That perspective may put death in its place, as smaller than God’s good news, not what ultimately matters. Or it may trivialize death and gloss over our difficulties and ignore our sadness. I can’t say on which side you might land.

Another response is to treat the Easter message as kind of irrelevant or distant, and to take matters into our own hands in the meantime. If we don’t know where God is with the virus, we may make it depend on us to try helping each other through this hard time. The reading from 1st John instructs us we should lay down our lives in love, and if we have the ability to assist, we really, really ought to do it. BYOB Bible study struggled lots with these demands’ insistence on our lives and our bank accounts and our efforts.

Again, I don’t have a clear answer for this. Does God want us to help? Absolutely. Does God work through us? We’d certainly say so. Through these months that could be the healing by medical staff, our common care in getting vaccines, and so on. But does God *only* act through us, and is God waiting for us to do our part before God’s good can be accomplished? I don’t know, but it makes me much more nervous.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton’s Earth Day statement said this:

We know that healing is possible — for the planet and for our communities. We are not too late. The time is now. To us, God is calling; through us, God wants to work a miracle; through our finite and inadequate efforts, God can and will bring about ‘a new heaven and a new earth.’ God provides us with diverse gifts as protectors and guardians of creation. We affirm, therefore, the many stewards of the land who have been and are conserving the good earth that the Lord has given us.*

*<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8097>

Besides deeply disagreeing that God has *given* us this earth, I'm also nervous about the urgent responsibility of my little efforts bringing about God's vision of a new heaven and a new earth. You may be motivated by it, but I don't think I'm capable of that amount of life-giving. God better have a back-up plan!

We'd like to help, to be "protectors and guardians." We want it to turn out well in the end. But is that real life? And is that God's way? Another part of Jesus' words today are not so clearly the good news, definitely pre-resurrection. Jesus talks about laying down his life. His main point is to die.

I am reluctant to cast wolves as the bad guys, as primarily a predator on livestock, much less as a danger to humans, but to follow through on Jesus' metaphor, he doesn't say he's going to protect and guard the sheep of his flock by killing the wolf, by releasing his hunting dogs and tracking it down with a rifle (or whatever the 1st Century Palestinian equivalent would've been). He says that when a wolf comes to threaten the sheep, he'll die.

If we extrapolate this to our current context, it's not quite Tyler's question of why a loving God would send the coronavirus. Instead, Jesus implies that when threatened with a deadly virus, he'd lay down his life; he'd catch it and die. That may count for solidarity, that God isn't apart from our suffering and pain. But other than the support of teamship, I'm not sure how it helps to have the one we're relying on wind up dead. We'd prefer Jesus to say, I am the good vaccine. I am the good doctor. I am the good antidote for all that ails you and steals life. I'll fight like hell against anything that gets in the way. That's not what Jesus says. That's not what God does. I don't know why.

Our first reading has a frequently quoted Old Testament verse: *the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*. A cornerstone sets the alignment for the whole rest of the building. In this case, all of what we're building would've rejected Jesus as unfit for our alignment. But that's how God does it. We wouldn't naturally look at a shepherd who winds up dead as a good definition for the profession. We wouldn't count

one who doesn't stand up very well to the virus as helpful for health or for our course of action. We wouldn't count a loving God who dies rejected as the basis of a religion, of our hope, of the arc of the universe.

If this is the shape of the universe, we should be able to spot it around us. Just after this, Jesus will compare himself to a seed that is planted, dead and buried, but rises to bear the fruit of new life (12:24). So is God's work like what we see in our gardens?



Maybe we witness it with the prairie burn this week? An apparent vision of resurrection, of old death that already is greening and rising to new life. But I'm not sure what that means for the baby bunnies that were trapped in the burn. Their death may nourish other life, but they themselves need more of a resurrection promise, or else it becomes a miniscule metaphor of the circle of life, which is fine for the Lion King but doesn't reveal God's way as the true shape of the universe.

Maybe in this Earth Week, we at least re-examine what we've been trying to build, the pattern we'd followed and the cornerstone we chose, how we've tried to shape life and the expense that causes our planet and its vulnerable peoples. We might reconsider our ways.

The Earth Day message from Bishop Eaton also talks of racism and repentance, and says:

Because God gave humans the vocation to be stewards of the earth, we proclaim that, for Christians, care of the earth is...central to our holy calling to treasure the earth and care for it as our home, fully integrating creation care into our love of

God, neighbor and all in the environment... [W]e know our recovery from the pall of 2020 will, in many ways, be a transition to a new way of life.

So beyond the pall of 2020, maybe we follow God's way in Jesus, the rejected cornerstone, not to make life more profitable or to enable us to live longer and extend our efforts, but to reset the whole foundation, with the one who commends the giving away of life, a life laid down.

Can we glimpse it in banks finally turning away from lucrative fossil fuels? In power companies installing renewable energy? In justice for Black lives? In world leaders on a Zoom screen putting aside differences to talk climate change?

Again, I don't really know. But maybe we will find ourselves catching up with the arc of the universe and beginning already to live in the future we proclaim as we continue to declare: Alleluia, Christ is risen.