

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Resurrection is still in view, although today it is hidden in the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

All throughout the Old Testament one hears of sheep and their shepherds. Abel was “*a keeper of sheep*” (Gen. 4:2), for example. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob tended flocks. Moses “*was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro*” (Ex. 3:1-2), when the Lord called out to him from the burning bush and called him into service to lead His “*people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt*” (Ex. 3:10). A number of years later a young shepherd boy by the name of David would be anointed King over Israel, the Lord saying, “*You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel*” (2 Sam. 5:2).

In the Gospels, we don’t encounter shepherds so frequently. After their prominent role in the birth of Jesus, we meet no other shepherds. Yet, the prophecies echo about the coming ruler who would “*stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God*” (Micah 5:4), of the Lord GOD Himself who would come, yes, to rule “*with might*” (Isa. 40:10), but especially to “*tend his flock like a shepherd,*” gathering “*the lambs in his arms*” and carrying “*them in his bosom*” (Isa. 40:11), etc.

Jesus declares these prophecies and more fulfilled in Him today, when He declares: “*I AM the Good Shepherd.*” I AM “*The LORD,*” whom David declared to be His shepherd. Again, through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord declares “*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice*” (Ezek. 34:15–16).

This kind of language makes the Good Shepherd image so appealing. We love the image of Jesus as the shepherd, seeking after lost sheep. For we know how feeble is our faith; we know how often we wander off from the flock; we know how often we listen to alien voices; we know how often we are scattered by the howls of wolves; we know these things, and we know how the Scriptures speak of us: “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way*” (Isa. 53:6).

And so, the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd chasing after the one lost sheep, finding it and placing it on His shoulders, carrying the little lamb back to sheep fold, is a comforting picture. That’s understandable.

But that's actually not the image of the Good Shepherd that Jesus paints here. Instead, what sets Jesus apart as the Good Shepherd is the fact that He *"lays down His life for the sheep."* Other shepherds defend and protect and bind up wounds, but the Good Shepherd lays down His life.

You know what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about the cross that looms menacingly ahead of Him. And yet, He shrinks not from it, but goes willingly to His death. Oppressed, afflicted, bearing our iniquities, for us sheep, Jesus goes silently to the cross. As St. Paul says, *"while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8).

To be sure, you may know of someone who did a noble thing and sacrificed his or her life for another. Jesus will say, *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends"* (John 15:13). Paul acknowledges it happens, though rare: *"one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die"* (Rom. 5:7). But Christ is different. He is *"the righteous [One, dying] for the unrighteous"* (1 Pet. 3:18), the Son of God dying for the ungodly. More than that, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for *"sheep that are not of this fold,"* that He might gather His sheep into *"one flock"* under one banner, the banner of His cross.

What is more, the Good Shepherd not only suffers and dies for us sinners, but He offers up His life *"of His own accord."* *"No one takes [my life] from me,"* Jesus says. Not the Jews, not the Romans. Jesus told Pilate, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above"* (John 19:11). *"I have [the] authority to lay it down,"* Jesus says. *"I could have asked the Father to send legions of angels to deliver me, but the Scriptures must be fulfilled"* (Matt. 26:53).

Jesus is also different from the other sacrifices, the noble death, also because Jesus not only had the authority to lay down His life; He also had the authority to take it back up again in resurrection victory. That makes Him unique. This was the authority granted Him in His flesh by the Father: the authority and ability to die, and the authority and the power to take up His life again — our Good Shepherd lives.

And all this He did for you. St. Peter says it this way: *"Christ also suffered for you, ... He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ... he was reviled, ... he suffered, ... He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"* (1 Pet. 2:21-25).

We have returned to Him because we are listening to His voice and following after Him. But beware, for there are other voices seeking to draw you away from Jesus, “*men speaking twisted things,*” St. Paul said (Acts 20:30). He called them “*fierce wolves*” (v. 29) that, as Jesus says, snatch the sheep and scatter them. And they don’t have to look fierce to be dangerous. In fact, they may seem harmless, even nice. But Jesus calls them “*ravenous wolves*” “*in sheep’s clothing*” (Matt. 7:15). They seek to snatch you away from Jesus. Let us remember, Jesus says, “*No one comes to the Father except through me*” (Jn. 14:6). Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, you sheep, and follow Him. Remember what Peter proclaimed today: “*there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*”

Dear saints of God, the Good Shepherd came as our one Lord, our Shepherd, the one and only Good Shepherd, who came to lay down His life for us to bear away our sins. He came to take His life back again to open our way back to the Father, to lead us as a Shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death to the Father’s house, and to the eternal banquet table He has prepared for us.

Jesus is a Shepherd in the line of all those who preceded Him, but He is the fulfillment of all that they prefigured, and more. He is the Good Shepherd, laying down His life for us and taking it up again, that we might have life to the full. He is the Good Shepherd, the Lord, leading us even now and supplying all that we need for this body and life — we shall not want. He gives us green pastures and still waters; He accounts us righteous by faith and leads us in the way of righteousness; He feeds us from this table now as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet; He fills our cups to overflowing. And He will come again to lead us to His house, where we will dwell with Him forevermore, so Good is our Shepherd.

Therefore, help us, Lord, as Your children, to listen to Jesus’ voice and follow where He leads, here in time and there in eternity.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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