

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2026
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on April 26, 2026

Acts 2:42-47 / Psalm 23 / 1 Peter 2:19-25 / John 10:1-10

*The sun has risen. Let us greet the day.
Christ has risen. The stone is rolled away.
Christ has risen. He has given us the victory.
Christ is alive. He has risen from the dead.
Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

There is a lot packed into today's readings, a lot intended for us to absorb into our own personal spiritual lives. Then set alongside the narratives is probably the most well-known piece of scripture, Psalm 23, calming and pastoral.

In the middle of following the examples of the apostles and discerning whether Jesus is the gate or the shepherd and how to go through Him or follow Him is this unsettling directive to withstand abuse. It's even more unsettling to 21C ears when we realize that the audience identified in the previous sentence is household servants, translated as "slaves" in the NRSV.

What gets lost is that all of these scriptures have in common, including the Psalm, is a call to be faithful to Christ, a call to not lose your faith. And they all point to an all-inclusive acceptance into the Body of Christ in ways that we are still struggling with today. So, I want to start with the slaves.

Our 2nd Reading from 1 Peter is missing its opening sentence, and it was deliberately left out by the drafters of the Lectionary. But I'm going to share it with you now:

*Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference,
not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.*

Then it goes on with what we already heard from *Jamie/Linda*, about enduring suffering and that endurance of suffering is modeling Christ's suffering. This passage was widely used to support slavery, the chattel slavery here in the United States. It has been used – along with the passage that comes after it – to promote the subjugation of women in relationships. And I just want to put some context around this so when you are reading and reflecting on scripture at home, you have the proper context of this passage.

Firstly, οἰκέται is better translated as *servant*, as in house servants. That was a reality of the 1C Palestine context into which Peter was speaking. It was a very different type of slavery than the chattel slavery of The Americas prior to the Civil War, and very different than modern slavery and human trafficking of today. Physical abuse of such servants was by no means widespread, but it was also not non-existent. I am not an apologist for 1C slavery or servanthood, nor an expert. I am simply relaying to you the context which has been handed down to me through my study.

Within that context, servants were supposed to follow the religion of their masters. And if their masters were pagans, or of no religion, servants could be castigated for practicing their faith, particularly those who followed this new religion that involved the claim of a man being raised from the dead. And into that dynamic, Peter was saying: *Stay faithful to Jesus! Jesus will set you free!*

So, our reading from 1 Peter is not about slavery. It's about living a Christian life, as a follower of Jesus, and withstanding the challenges that come with living that Christian life in one's context. Peter is addressing the slaves, not their masters. He is addressing the slaves as equals to the others in his audience. Just as in the next chapter, Peter is addressing the wives who are Christians, but whose husbands are not. And overall, Peter is addressing those in the first sentence of his letter:

*To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia,
and Bithynia.*

He's not addressing a conference of educated elites. He's addressing those new followers of Christ in the far-flung reaches of the Roman Empire who have very little to help sustain them on their journey to follow Jesus. They are either Jewish or pagan converts to Christianity in what is now Central Turkey. As University of Oxford Theologian Eric Eve writes of the 1st Letter of Peter:

The purpose of the letter is not to convey doctrinal information or specific ethical instruction, but rather to urge the recipients to hold fast to their faith in the face of hostility.

And I want you to know that before we move on to how to use this scripture to be better followers of Christ ourselves. Think of Peter's audience like the Cardinals fan or the White Sox fan who works in your office, or the Seahawks fan or Jets fan who is in your friend group. They are abused for their faith, but they remain faithful. That's the elephant in the room, and I've made sure y'all know that it's there and why it's there.

And I wasn't to explore the inclusion of household servants or slaves in Peter's letter. They, too, are followers of Jesus – they are sheep of the Good Shepherd, and they are those whose access to God is through Jesus the Gate. This passage is yet another example of the radical inclusivity of Jesus. It's another example of radical inclusivity that has been manipulated for centuries to serve corrupt purposes. And now we can reclaim this example of the radical inclusivity of the Jesus Movement, of Christianity.

By including servants – those of the lowest status in Roman society and culture – Peter elevated them. Peter showed no partiality to the least of these. His concern was that they were followers of Christ, and he spoke into their situation. It wasn't his mission or role to dismantle the social structures of Roman society. It was his mission and role to nurture the followers of Christ, without hesitation and without bias. Peter was doing a bit of 1C DEI ... diversity, equity and inclusion ... with who makes up the Body of Christ. So, Peter stresses that they stay faithful to Christ and not succumb to the faith of the master.

Meanwhile, we hear in the Gospel about the thieves. Again, there is danger. And Jesus establishes that He, as the Good Shepherd, is safety. What jumps out at us in today's readings is that the world is not a safe place for some people. But faith in Christ brings spiritual safety, inner strength. And since the days of the Early Church, the Christian tradition has held perseverance in the face of persecution in high regard. In fact, as you read the history of the Early Church, it begs the question:

Is the only true Church the persecuted Church?

That's a question that we are going to explore at Devotions & Dinner in May.

Not only do the house servants live in danger in their own households, the sheep are in constant danger, even in their own enclosed pasture. Some pastures were enclosed by a low rock wall with a gate, just as described in the Gospel. Sheep were a valuable source of food, clothing and sale at the market, so stealing sheep was common. The rock wall or fence made it more difficult to haul a sheep over it and escape. So, the gate was the way in. And since sheep do actually know the voice of their shepherd, Jesus says to not be fooled by the thief. Danger is all around when the appearance is that everything is safe.

This theme of danger in the 2nd Lesson and the Gospel – with safety being in Christ – brings the realities of life into light so that we are not disillusioned into thinking that faith in Christ makes for a perfect material world. Faith in Christ gives us a spiritual strength that helps us in the otherwise challenging material world. As UCC Minister and Trauma-Informed Spiritual Director Shannon Michael Pater wrote:

Part of the mystery of faith and the riddle of the discourse is the presence of danger, even while in the sheep fold in the fields of good, green grass.

So, what does this mean to those of us who are not only relatively safe, but very safe? Does it mean that we are more faithful, better followers of Christ, rewarded by our piety? Of course not! What it means for us is – well, firstly, not to be disillusioned that life will always be easy – but it means for us to be a materially safe space for those for whom life is unsafe and hard. Can we be a place where all people are safe? Can Jesus the Good Shepherd in our window be a comfort to all? Pater writes:

There are good green grass and still waters, but it is the presence of the Shepherd that makes the field safe and nourishing.

How can we be better at making this a safe space for those whose lives present danger or strife?

Here in the Happiest City in America, there are people who feel unsafe and whose lives are hard. We help some of them through our charity. But they remain faceless and nameless. But if Jesus is the Gate to safety, to Heaven, to Eternal Life, we, as the Church, the Body of Christ, could be the gatekeeper to let in and to protect those who are vulnerable, within our own fold. We could welcome into the fold those who are seeking refuge and get to know their faces and names:

- The abused woman
- The unhoused
- The food insecure
- Those struggling to pay bills
- The drug or alcohol addict and the sex addict
- Those people with all of the letters: lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and non-binary
- Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

For a decade, we've been arguing their worthiness of basic human rights and personal dignity, in the halls of power and in the grocery store aisles in ways that

we never had before. But the command for and examples of inclusion have always been right in front of us. Jesus calls us by name; Peter doesn't hesitate to include the marginalized. Because being a follower of Jesus was never limited to a particular group or type of person.

Our own Jesus the Good Shepherd can be a safe haven for those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Is that where our faith can lead us?

10yrs ago, when I first arrived at St Stephen's, there was a man in the congregation named David. He attended the 10am Service every Sunday and came to Coffee Hour and had engaging conversations with whomever was at his table. David was homeless. He lived behind one of our storage barns – not by any arrangement – we just knew that he was there. As an unhoused person, David's daily life was dangerous. But he found safety here, with us, with Jesus the Good Shepherd, for a couple of years.

Unfortunately, we made David's life even more unsafe. We were getting another barn. It required heavy equipment for installation. When the Sexton informed David that he would have to move so the barn could be installed, we never saw David again.

Until that moment, this was a safe space, and inclusive space. David was regarded with no partiality – he was not lesser than anyone else here. Visitors didn't know that he was homeless. How do we continue to be a safe and inclusive space? How can we see the faces and know the names of those who are seeking safety? It starts with *our own* faith: our unwavering faith in the face of adversity; our ability and *willingness* to:

devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... to have all things in common; to sell our possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any has need.

Back to the slaves: Jesus Christ does not condone violence and abuse of human beings, or the dehumanizing of groups of people in order to justify violence against them. Following Jesus calls us to faithfulness, and that faith excludes no one who sincerely wants to follow Jesus Christ. Life is hard for many people, and the social stratification of our own society has no place in our faith. Peter says to persevere; Jesus says to know your master's voice. As we break bread together with glad and generous hearts, as we praise God with goodwill, as (*hopefully*) the Lord adds to our number those who were being saved, let us bear witness that Christ shows no partiality and that, indeed, Christ the Good Shepherd is in whom they shall fear no evil.