

Fourth Sunday of Easter – 2026

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

Swindlers can come in any shape, any size. The movie *Paper Moon* is a hoot. Real life father and daughter Ryan O’Neal and Tatum O’Neal teamed up for the silver screen. The young lass was only eight years old when they filmed the movie. They portray a possible but uncertain father and daughter con team (Moses or Moze and Addie). In one scene, Moze pays for his items in a store with a twenty-dollar bill and exits the establishment. After a couple of ladies complete their purchases, the adorable Addie walks up to the register, asks for a bottle of purple toilet water (whatever that is) and pays for her .25 item with a five. She receives her change and then, after a theatrical pause, tells the lady that she made a mistake. The clerk is sure that she hasn’t and recaps the transaction. That’s when the swindle trap is sprung. Addie begins to cry and says that her aunt Helen in Wichita gave her a twenty-dollar bill and wrote “Happy Birthday, Addie” on the back. The manager, trying to calm things down, confirms that there’s exactly such a twenty in the register and gives it to the little girl, who has made herself a quick \$20. Moze had written the birthday message on his twenty and staged the con perfectly.

Swindlers, thieves and robbers – have you ever had anything stolen from you? Con men, grifters and scammers – they want to take advantage of you. There’s a “Nigerian Prince” who has a fortune to share with you; he just needs a little cash up front – it’s in your email. Fraudulent emails want your account information – and the thieves will raise a glass to you if they get it. Are you circumspect? Do you lock your bicycle when tooling around town? We’ve had our share of swindling pastors, too (that is infuriating). The Bible says that Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). How many of y’all, as you get older, believe that you are becoming more discerning? Do we mature in the faith so that we have a clearer understanding of what is real and what is fake? Your faith is a tremendous resource, wouldn’t you say? Your soul, do you have a Shepherd, a Good Shepherd?

Jesus is talking to a mixed crowd. Some genuine opponents are in this crowd – Pharisees. But you are His audience now. You are the ones He is teaching now. This is a sheepfold. There are, in this world, in our state, our town, thieves and robbers. They are a spiritual menace. False teaching, false doctrine, all constructed on a web of lies – thieves and robbers. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John 10:1-4). The Gatekeeper opens the door – remember that. The true Shepherd has access to the sheep through the door, the door that the Gatekeeper opens – remember that. The door sounds pretty important. A thief is going to jump the fence. A robber is not going to enter the sheepfold by the door but is going to jump the fence. The door; we trust the One who comes through the door. The Gatekeeper opens the door. The One who comes through the door is the true Shepherd of the sheep.

Jesus once looked out upon a sea of humanity that was gathered before him. He could see them. He saw their hopes, their fears, their struggles, the forces at work in their culture, the bad religious authorities – and He was moved in His spirit, moved with compassion in His gut (εσπλαγγνισθη). What did the Lord see? He saw that they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). We live in a culture where modesty is laughed at, where children are hyper-sexualized, where our entertainment stream is foul and profane and pornographic. Satan laughs with delight as spiritual truths are cast out of the public square, where public schools are devoted to evolution and gender fluidity and the Bible is deemed inappropriate for the library (that happened in *our* town). Harassed and helpless – it is an apt description for humans in any era who are at the mercy of a godless culture. How many of you perpetually have your guard at least half up?

Christ's compassion was effectuated. By that I mean that He didn't just feel an emotion and let it slip into a moment of pity and then move on. Christ's compassion acted. The Good Shepherd intended to go through the door, the door that the Gatekeeper opened, the authenticating door. Only the Good Shepherd goes through the door, that's why it is an authenticating door. Trust; by its very nature, trust is a relaxing frame of mind. Trust puts you at ease, allows you to breathe, to rest your mind. A sheep trusts its shepherd. And you? Your Shepherd went through the door. Because you are harassed and helpless. Because your sin accuses you. Because justice demands payment for your selfishness, your outsized pride, your merciless, judgmental spirit, your warped lust, your greed and covetousness and spiritual apathy. The door; compassion for you in your lost circumstance brought the Shepherd to the door and the Gatekeeper opened it.

Your Shepherd was crucified. The Good Shepherd was nailed to a cross – that's the door. God the Father is the Gatekeeper and He brought His Son to the door, the altar of the cross, and Jesus was sacrificed to take away your sins. That is the Shepherd who calls you by name. That is the authenticating act that gives the Shepherd access to the sheep. He loves you. He went through the door that only He could go through in order to be the Shepherd that you need. Forgiveness, full and free, is found in our Good Shepherd and His authenticating wounds. You are a forgiven child of God, a sheep of His fold. There are still plenty of thieves and robbers. They discard Christ's sacrifice and then attempt to gain access to the sheep using vain philosophy, using humanistic twaddle, using spiritual sleight of hand. St. Paul wrote this, and it certainly applies to us: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

I was told by someone of impeccable repute that bank tellers were trained to identify counterfeit by handling real money – over and over and over. By repeated handling, bank tellers knew the feel of the genuine article so thoroughly that whenever something false was in their hands they could tell – it was off, it was inauthentic, it was false. You're a bank teller but it's not money and it's not your hands – it's your ears and it is the Gospel. You hear the genuine teaching of Christ. St. Paul wrote this: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). "...we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Your ears hear the truth. You know His voice. He called you by name in Holy Baptism. He leads you in love.

Trust – He came through the door. His wounds are His authentication – He has access to the sheepfold, Him and Him alone. He is our Good Shepherd.

Now a snarky word, a snarky quip – not original to me but I resonate. “Our therapists have become our priests, and our priests have become our therapists.” That is a snarky diagnosis of the state of preaching in today’s Christian church. It also is an oblique reference to where folks are getting their spiritual food, and many are not looking to Christ’s church and that is a pity. Trusting Christ with all that you are and have will allow you to flourish in this life. It’s true. The Christian church is where He is found. Where His Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity, there trust abounds. Where Christ crucified is preached, there the Holy Spirit is at work to invigorate humanity, to instill virtue in the fallen, to create and sustain love, to build hope and bind believers into one. We are blessed here. The Father opened the door of the cross to His Son. The Good Shepherd came through the door of death and is risen. He ministers to us sheep through the Word and the Sacrament and trust grows. We are blessed here. May it ever be so.