

# Sermon – Easter 4A

## The Text: John 10:1-10

I'm going to tell you something you may already know as faithful regular worshippers, and if you don't, you're going to learn something about our lectionary:

On the first Sunday of Easter, we *always* hear about the women visiting Jesus' tomb and about the resurrection of our Lord.

On the second Sunday of Easter, we *always* hear about our risen Lord Jesus meeting his disciples in the locked room – firstly without Thomas, but a week later Thomas also gets to have a 'peek' and a 'poke' at the risen Lord Jesus.

On the third Sunday of Easter, we *always* hear about other post-resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus.

And on the fourth Sunday of Easter (which is today), we shift from the post-resurrection appearances and *always* hear from John chapter 10 where Jesus calls himself 'the Good Shepherd'.

We like the image of the Good Shepherd, which is why many schools and congregations are named after our Good Shepherd. Many of us may also have picture of our Good Shepherd cradling children or lambs in his arms on our walls at home.

Except...in our text for today, Jesus doesn't directly tell us he's the Good Shepherd (at least not yet – he's getting to it late in chapter 10 –but instead tells us he's the door; or in some translations, he says he's the gate.

Now, I wonder why we don't use this name for our schools or churches?

Perhaps we could name our schools: 'Doorway College' or we could call our congregation: 'Gatekeeper Church'! It doesn't quite have the same ring, does it?

We like the image of gentle Jesus, the Good Shepherd, so meek and mild, carrying lambs in his arms, but the image of him as a door or a gate gives the image of exclusion, segregation, rejection, being shut out, or missing out on something special. This type of image doesn't sound very inviting or comforting, in fact, it sounds disturbing and threatening!

Similarly, I wouldn't be surprised if you've come across 'gatekeepers' before and may have been hurt by them. 'Gatekeepers' are those who decide who's in (and who's out of) a group, a community, a church, a school, or a country. A gatekeeper is someone

who decides what standards are acceptable. A gatekeeper will be one who often controls a community even when they're not holding any official position.

Gatekeepers aren't intentionally bad people, but may consider themselves to be good and faithful people who are trying to keep a community safe and special. Gatekeepers are in most community groups, including many Christian congregations.

Unfortunately, no matter how good and faithful 'gatekeepers' are trying to be in our churches, many people who need to experience the grace, peace, protection, and love of the 'Good Shepherd' have instead experienced the slamming of 'doors' and 'gates' through harsh words, unfair judgments, unwarranted criticism, and a questioning of their faithfulness and sincerity.

Sometimes the gatekeeper's screams for repentance, judgment and meeting certain standards have become louder than the proclamations of love, forgiveness, peace and comfort through faith in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you've experienced some of this type of criticism and judgment from people before. It can be painful and demoralising. You can understand then how some people still love Jesus, but don't want much to do with his followers.

Now, it may be possible you've got someone in mind and are hoping they're listening to this sermon! But maybe, out of eager faithfulness to your Lord and Saviour, the Good Shepherd, is it possible you've also become a gatekeeper yourself?

- Have you decided who's worthy of your energy and attention and who isn't?
- Out of fear or love, have you thought, spoken, or acted harshly against those who don't agree with you?
- Are you selective about who should be in your circle of friendship, or in your congregation, or in your country?
- If you've experienced a form of separation in this congregation, are there certain people you'd welcome back...but at the same time, are there certain people you wouldn't welcome?

But maybe you know the image of Jesus being a door or gate isn't so much to exclude or shut out his sheep, but to protect his gathered sheep from danger.

As the Door or Gate, he's protecting his sheep (and those around us), from those who would come to steal us from his loving protection. Jesus knows many will try to lead us astray through false teaching and false living. Jesus knows thieves won't use the front door. They'll come via other ways in order to undermine his flock's faith in God.

Martin Luther also struggled to remain faithful to care and protect God's holy little flock from the deceptive and destructive voices of his day which would lead people away from trusting the Good Shepherd. He said one of the thieves or murderers (who won't come through the door or gate), is 'the majority'.

Just think of those loud or vocal 'majority' voices which try to silence the small voices in our society, or even our church.

If we're to watch out for 'the majority', what would this mean for a church which has adopted a democratic process which is supposed to favour 'the majority'?

I suppose we simply trust 'the majority' are always right, but is this always the case? What happens if 'the majority' opposes Christ himself by not listening to him and his words? 'The majority' can be easily led away from God's Word because they can easily be led by 'popular' fears and desires other than the fear and love of God.

Luther said another thief would be 'anyone who teaches salvation can be found outside of Christ and his Word' (since his Word is the voice of the Good Shepherd which his sheep listen to).

Therefore, if anyone tries to separate the work of salvation from the work of Christ (or more subtly to separate the work of Christ from the Word of God) is trying to steal us away from him and his flock.

Outside of Christ and his Word is where thieves and robbers play. That's how the devil and the other false teachers of this world tempt us to believe our salvation and life and success and hope and peace can be achieved without trusting God and his Word (even the difficult or unpopular words).

These deceptive voices aren't the voices of the Good Shepherd. They lead us away from Jesus Christ who is both the Door and the Good Shepherd.

When we're tempted to become gatekeepers and place demands or judgments on each other as to whether we're good enough, holy enough, faithful enough, or whether we agree with each other, it would serve us well to remember: there's only one true Door – and it's not you or me!

No matter how faithful you're seeking to be or how much you love those around you, there's only One who truly comes to love and protect his sheep by placing himself in harm's way on the cross for you. Only One comes to heal and forgive by shedding his own blood for you. Only One comes to grant life and salvation through his glorious resurrection for you.

You want to know how to pick out a false 'gatekeeper'? False gatekeepers won't put themselves on the line (no matter how much they boast they will). They'll always demand you're the one who should give your life and pay the price or lift your game.

On the other hand, Jesus is the true Gatekeeper who cares and protects his flock by putting himself on the line, or more specifically, on the cross, for you and me.

It's only through the door of Christ's holy life and bloody sacrifice that we have eternal life with his holy flock. Through him and him alone, we have the promise of life with him in heaven. He's the door dripping with water and blood through whom we find good pasture, peace, and abundant life.

You want to know how Jesus operates as a door or gate?

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who bled for all the times we live for ourselves and not for others.

He died to pay for the times we've neglected to care and serve and love those difficult 'gatekeepers' in our midst.

He died for the times our eyes, fingers, tongue, and lips have seen, touched, spoken or acted selfishly and sinfully.

He died for the way we judge and punish others for holding different views.

He shed his holy and innocent blood in order to wash our bodies, consciences, and hearts clean and make them pure and holy.

He died the death we deserve because of our own feeble attempts to become gatekeepers who decide who's in and who's out of our lives or our communities.

He also rose again from death to declare the thieves called 'sin', 'death' or 'Satan' has no claim on those who trust the Good Shepherd.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today is called 'Good Shepherd Sunday' where we hear about the Gate through which the Good Shepherd comes to care for, and protect, his beloved sheep, including you and me.

Let's keep on listening carefully to his voice so we may keep on hearing his words of forgiveness, hope, mercy, and love, knowing no-one can snatch us out of his hands.

Let's keep on encouraging each other to keep united as his faithful flock who trust his words.

Let's also respect and honour each other as valued sheep of the Good Shepherd who have been redeemed by the innocent blood of Christ. Amen.