

Easter 4
April 17, 2016

"Baaa!"

The Rev. Jeanette M. Repp
St. Peter's, San Pedro

Confession time...are you a Dodgers or Angels fan? Clippers or Lakers? (Giants, anyone?) There are many reasons why we like our teams, why we like to go to a game or watch them on TV. They're fun, exciting, an outlet, and they distract us from other stressors in our lives.

Another reason, though, is they provide us with a kind of community. Other fans of the same team are kindred spirits. Rooting for the same cause, we bond with them; even when we've never met them; even while watching on TV. For some people it's the strongest community of which they're a part, the most potent cause for which they get fired up.

The bible uses the metaphor of sheep over and over to describe another way we come together as a *herd* (if you will,) led by our shepherd. (now given my previous example, hear me out, i don't mean this in a negative way.) The 23rd psalm is one of the most well-known references to sheep and shepherds in scripture –

*"The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want..."*

There are many others, though, that are also pretty well known –the *Jubilate Deo*, which some of us will remember from Morning Prayer –

*"Know this: the Lord Himself is god;
He Himself has made us,
and we are His;
we are His people
And the sheep of His pasture."*

My most direct experience with sheep, however, was a difficult one. A number of years ago I took some high school youth down to the Heifer Ranch in Arkansas. It's an educational ranch owned by the *Heifer Project*, and provides opportunities for people of all ages to learn about food resources and their distribution. Many here are already familiar with this world-wide the project and how it does a lot of education in under-developed areas, on caring for livestock and setting up micro-businesses from the animals: The gift of one goat, for example can produce milk for cheese, hair for blankets and sweaters, etc. Well, on this trip, a few of us got to learn what it's really like to shear a sheep and clean the wool to prepare it for spinning.

I have always had a special place in my heart for lambs: they are so cute and cuddly! But the truth of it is, that sheep are very dirty, and not all that bright. In general, I really don't mind getting my hands dirty, but sheering that sheep and cleaning its wool, was disgusting! (We had to clean about everything out of that wool before it was ready to be dried, pulled, and then spun!)

So, given the way sheep really are why then do we have this '*we like sheep*' stuff all over scripture? Well, the good news is it is not used as a reflection on our hygiene or our intelligence, but rather, on other qualities like our relationality. Sheep are fundamentally dependent on one other and on their shepherd. They cannot survive alone.

The metaphor, then, that we are like sheep with Christ as our shepherd, serves both to remind us how much we need one another in community, as well as how much we need God to be our guide. Whether it is through our fellow sports fans or through our worship on Sunday communities are essential to human existence.

Some would say that the greatest proof of Easter, is the women finding the tomb empty on Easter morning. Some would say that it's that Jesus actually rose from the dead, and visited the disciples afterward. Miracles, *yes!* Powerful evidence of God's love, *yes!* And yet I'd say, the most potent proof of Easter, and what it can mean for the world, is that we're here today, over 2000 years later. Together, now, gathered in this faith community!

Hear me out: what if after Jesus' death, the women had simply sat down and grieved? Or been so afraid that they didn't tell anyone? What if after those women told the disciples, their disbelief had been even more significant than it was, and they hadn't gone back, but rather had simply stayed huddled together in fear in a dark, door-locked room?

Think about it: it wasn't so much the lack of the body that proved it was "Easter." Likewise, it wasn't simply that Jesus came back and showed himself. The resurrection was the raising of Jesus from the dead. It is *also* the *love* that took that motley crew of grief-stricken individuals and made them a community; a faith-family, with common beliefs and concerns and a commitment to one-another and Jesus' teachings.

The community of the resurrection, especially as John describes it, is one that has shared a rough time together, and yet through that journey they have grown *together*. And that, my friends, is one of the greatest proofs of Easter, the presence of Christian community, after all is said and done.

It is the women and the other disciples gathering together, despite their busy lives & families, their tremendous grief and fears. Similarly, *it is us*, here and now, gathered together as Christians have for millenia.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!