



## THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

2 May 2004

Acts 9:1-6

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

Sheep are not the brightest of animals. Among other things they tend to wander and to get themselves stuck in situations that they have a tough time getting out of. Sheep also have notoriously poor vision, but to make up for this lack, sheep are acutely tuned to sound and so they bond quickly to the specific voice of those who take care of them—their shepherds.

Now, imagine, if you will, the dry, open range. Imagine a watering hole there to which sheep from many flocks gather. You are a shepherd. Your sheep have drunk enough water, and it's time for you to gather your sheep together and lead them back out to pasture. But *your* sheep are so intermingled with sheep from *other* flocks that it is nearly hopeless to try to separate out your sheep—as soon as you've got one disentangled from the group around the water hole, the others that you had already separated have now wandered back into the fray—ready to drink themselves to death. What to do? You, the shepherd merely need to let the sheep hear the sound of your voice; the sheep of *your* flock will recognize *your* voice—even though they really can't see you – or much of anything—well enough to save their very lives. But they *do* recognize your voice when you call out and they follow you.

Jesus said to the Judeans—*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.* But just who are the sheep that Jesus knows? Who are these sheep that follow him?

Let's start with the verb “to know” in the world of Scripture. “To know” certainly means *to perceive, to be familiar with*; it can also mean *to understand someone or something*. “To know” also means *to have intimate relations with* someone. Everyone in the world of Scripture is aware of this range of meanings, and all of those meanings stand close by whenever the verb *to know* is used. So, who is it that Jesus perceives, is familiar with, who is it that Jesus understands, who is it that Jesus is intimate with?

Those who are religious are quite sure of who God or God's representative should know, be familiar with, should understand, and should be intimate with: nice people—religious people—spiritual people—people who obey the commandments—people who are pious—people who do what they are supposed to do.

Yup, that's what the good religious folk would say. And it is certainly what any representative of God *should* say. If this Jesus of Nazareth really were *Messiah* he would know that. Rather than *knowing* the *right* people, however, Jesus has been hanging around with riff-raff from Galilee—irreligious folk from a most irreligious region. Even more horrifying is that this Jesus has been hanging around with women – and in particular he has been seen in the company of a notoriously loose and sinful Samaritan woman whom he seems to have seduced at the village well in Sychar. And one must wonder exactly how well Jesus got to *know* the little tart. And then Jesus presumes to try to heal a lame man on the Sabbath – and everyone knows that the only reason a person is lame—or disabled in any fashion—is on account of their sin. And who can figure out that sick relationship between Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary—you have to wonder in what way this so-called Messiah *knows them*.

If Jesus were the Messiah we've been waiting for, Jesus would *condemn* them, would wipe them off the earth and would instead *know* the *religious* —if Jesus really were Messiah, he would be knowing the righteous,

those who follow the law, and it would be the godly who would hear and follow him. It appears, however, that Jesus only perceives, understands the *ungodly*, is familiar with the *ungodly*, is intimate with—the *ungodly*. The ones hearing and following Jesus are about the most raggedy, hideous bunch of losers you can imagine—a virtual army of freaks.

Yes. Precisely. And that's more gospel than most of us can handle in a lifetime. The Messiah *Jesus* perceives and is familiar with the plight of *sinners*, of the *ungodly*—that is to say, of every human being that has, does, and will walk the face of this earth. Jesus understands the *ungodly*—understands *our* nature and *our* lot. The Messiah *Jesus* is intimately bound to us in every facet our lives.

But do we hear? Do we follow? The answer is—most assuredly—NO. On our own, we are those in the story who do not trust, who cannot hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. We are too busy listening to the voices of the world that tell us—yes—you can be perfect, you can be a winner, you can be beautiful, buff, brainy, and brawny. You can be number one. You can be anything you want to be. You can be . . . God. That's the voice we listen to better than any other.

That, however, is why we have the church—where the word and sacraments are—that through the ministry of the word and sacraments the darkness of our will to perfection, our will to be god may be brought to light—that through the word and sacraments our ears may be opened that we may hear the voice of the Good Shepherd that says—yes, *you are* the *ungodly*, and it's *precisely* you I have come to save—it is you, the *ungodly*, I deliver from death. It is you, the *ungodly*, to whom I give *true* life—the kind of life that endures beyond every boundary of time and space.

All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us to our own way. But know this: the Good Shepherd understands you intimately. And the Good Shepherd is continually opening your ears so that you might hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd will lead you to your true home. And you will have life.