

Fourth Sunday of Easter
26 April 2026



Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Oh, why did we not have Pastor Edwin preach today? What joy would have been ours to listen to him try and pronounce the word sheep not once, not twice, but six times. I had forgotten about Pastor Edwin's aversion to the word sheep until I heard him try to explain that he had played Lambs Head a couple of times. And I thought to myself, Lambs Head, what card game is that – until I realized he was explaining that he had played sheepshead a couple of times. Man – he is fast with the workaround.

One of our JOLT students in our junior high program was asked by a parent what he did last Thursday night at JOLT. "We played a trivia game," he said. "Was that it?" asked the mom. "No, we learned about the Easter story in different books of the Bible," he said. "Okay, well, was that it?" asked the mom. "No, we had worship at the end." "Great," his mom said, knowing there was still more to the story. "Nothing else?" she asked. "Oh, well I helped with worship. I was a bartender." Now, I will tell you of all the words I have heard used to describe being an acolyte – "bartender" is absolute first. Turn your nose up at the description if you must – but the gift of that description is a perfect reflection on what it means to have, to live an abundant life in and with Jesus.

It is a much loved, often repeated verse of the Bible. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The words of Jesus are often quoted. They are not often explained – unpacked – lived out. What does it mean to live this abundant life Jesus offers us today? Maybe we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's back up.

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Well, that might be true most of the time. God knows, we have, each of us followed a stranger's voice a time or two. Chose to follow a voice we did not recognize down a road that led us to ruin -a valley to climb out of once again – a pit we had to be rescued from a time or two. We may know the voice of the Shepherd very well and still find ourselves following another voice. The siren's song of the Starbuck's mermaid. What? The get-rich-quick scheme. The quick fix. The promised cure that somehow no one else knows about. Especially when we are in a moment of great desperation – we can be all too ready to follow the stranger's voice...even as we know the voice of the shepherd – the one who calls us by name and leads us out.

The abundant life is above all a contented life, one of peace, happiness, and acceptance in which our contentment is based upon the fact that God is equal to every emergency and can supply all our needs while still allowing us opportunities to learn and grow. That being said – I might suggest that an abundant life isn't an especially long life and certainly an abundant life does not mean an easy, comfortable life. In the end, an abundant life, the abundant life Jesus promises to us is a life of satisfaction and contentment in Jesus. I would guess, there are times, most of us are able to tell the story of that abundant life. When the laughter of friendship brings tears to our eyes. When the healing is so pronounced that the story of the healing is much more exciting to tell than the descent into the disease. When the food around the table is enough, but the conversation around the table causes us to linger long after our hunger is satisfied for the presence of those we love. When one more hug, one more story, one more goodbye causes us to hold on to a moment that fills us in a way we do not wish to end. There is an abundance of life, in the presence of Jesus, that we can often dismiss, as we often do, when we do not remember the voice of the One who invites us to gather.

Shepherds are hard to sell these days. Most of us are unacquainted with any shepherds in the world today. In Idaho, I met farmers – shepherds really – who only raised and tended sheep – but they were known as farmers. In Tanzania, we met members of Masai tribes who worship in our sister churches – goat herders by trade –

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shepherds in their own right – but still goat herders. No shepherds are hard to sell these days and even harder to come by. And yet, Psalm 23 is still the psalm of choice at most funerals. Is it because the words bring comfort or because it is the only psalm most people remember from earlier days of Sunday School and words of blessing spoken over them by a parent or grandparent.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death. I fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The story is told of an evening dinner party where a great actor was asked to recite a reading for the pleasure of his fellow guests. He consented and asked if there was anything special that his audience would like to hear. After a pause, a pastor long-retired said: “Could you, sir, recite to us the Twenty-third Psalm?”

A strange look passed over the actor's face; he paused for a moment, and then said: “I can, and I will, with one condition; and that is that after I have recited it, you, my friend, will do the same.” “I?” said the clergyman, in surprise. “But who am I but an old man. However, if you wish it, I will do so.” Impressively, the great actor began the psalm. His voice and his intonation were perfect. He held his audience spell bound; and as he finished, a great burst of applause broke from the guests. Then, as it died away, the old clergyman arose and began the psalm. His voice was not remarkable; his intonation was not faultless. When he had finished, no sound of applause broke the silence—but there was not a dry eye in the room, and many heads were bowed. Then the actor rose to his feet again. His voice shook as he laid his hand upon the shoulder of the old pastor and said: “I reached your eyes and ears, my friends; but, this man, he reached your hearts. *The difference is just this—I knew the words, but he knows the Shepherd.*”

It is one of the many moments we celebrate in this community of faith – the welcome, the stories, the laughter, the support that shares with us an abundance of the life Jesus promises to us. In both the times of joy and sorrow – that among us are many who know both the words and the shepherd. And for those of us, who are still learning the words or getting to know the shepherd – there is both a depth of faith to witness and many who will help to guide each other to the voice of the shepherd and the abundant life Jesus, our shepherd, promises to us. What, then, is the life in abundance that Jesus promises? Much of John's Gospel is focused on this gift of life:

- “In him was *life*, and the *life* was the light of all people” (1:4).
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have *eternal life*” (3:16).
- “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will *live*” (11:25).
- “And this is *eternal life*, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (17:3).
- “But these are written so that you may believe... and that through believing you may have *life* in his name” (20:31).

“Life” or “eternal life” in John's Gospel is not just about life after death. It is life that begins here and now; it is knowing the one true God and Jesus, the Christ whom God has sent. It is knowing the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us. It is life in community, finding security and nourishment as part of his flock. It is life that abounds in meaning and value and endures even beyond death. Sometimes its playing Lambshead.

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Sometimes it is serving as bartender. At all times, this abundant life, is laughter and tears, stories of strength, stories of healing, and always, always stories of resurrection – in this life and in the next. Thanks be to God! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.