

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
The fourth Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
You are not the pet of a dead owner.

¹¹“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me ¹⁵(just as the Father knows me and I know the Father). And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This is the commission I received from my Father.”

– John 10:11-18 EHV

Bobby and John could often be seen patrolling the streets of the Scottish city of Edinburgh. In the 19th century, John Gray took a job as a night patrolman for the police department. Bobby was his trusty canine companion, a Skye Terrier. These two spent many nights walking the dark streets.

Sadly, John Gray was on one day diagnosed with tuberculosis. This is the disease that took his life. John’s body was laid to rest in the kirkyard at Greyfriars Kirk or the graveyard at the local church.

Supposedly, a strange phenomenon followed John’s burial. Bobby would not leave the grave. Evidently, Bobby never left John’s grave after this. Other than the times where he went to go get some food, Bobby stayed at his master’s grave. For 14 years, Bobby remained in that kirkyard. In rain, snow, and extreme heat, Bobby stayed at the graveside of his beloved master and owner, John.

This is the story of Greyfriars Bobby. Today, if you go to Edinburgh, you will see many items dedicated to this dog, including a statue erected to honor him.

Many people remark about Greyfriars Bobby's supposed loyalty. Bobby was so loyal to his master that even after his death, he did not leave his side. For many, this is a heartwarming tale.

Now, I must wonder, is this really a heart-warming tale? If Bobby truly stayed by that grave for 14 years, sure, that demonstrates loyalty but doesn’t this make him a rather foolish animal? Yes, he knew his owner, who no longer knew him. There was nothing that John could do for Bobby any longer. Bobby’s loyalty was misplaced.

At the end of the day, the story of Greyfriars Bobby is about a dog that wasted his time and life. This dog followed his master to the grave and never left it. Greyfriars Bobby was a pet of a dead owner.

As a Christian today, many people may look at you like Greyfriars Bobby. They see your loyalty to Jesus, hear your confession of faith, and see your fruits, which flow from faith. Then, they think that you are just the pet of a dead owner.

Many of these people see that you are loyal to Jesus. Unfortunately, they may think you are foolishly loyal. They may say, “Look around. Your master is gone.” They may think that you are just like the dog who hung around the graveyard of Greyfriars Church when you go to church. They simply think you are a pet who is loyal to a dead master.

Okay, but who cares about what the world thinks about us in this realm? Who cares if they think we are just pets that are loyal to a dead owner? Well, do you? Are you tempted to think that your master is simply gone? Perhaps you are not tempted to doubt his resurrection. Perhaps, though, you are tempted to look around at the world, your life, and everything going on and think that your master went AWOL.

People of Emmanuel, are you tempted to think of yourself as the 21st-century version of a 19th-century dog? Do you feel like the pet of a dead owner? If you are tempted to feel as though Jesus is gone or that he is not in control. First, recognize that such doubt is sin. Then, in repentance, let's hear Jesus' words today as he talks about himself as the Good Shepherd.

When we consider Jesus' description of himself as the Good Shepherd, pastors often share with the congregation the role of a shepherd. Today, I want to liken a shepherd to the owner of a pet. What is a shepherd like? Well, consider how you take care of your dog or cat. That good boy is a part of your family, right? You feed him every day. You exercise him by taking him for walks. You make sure that he receives things that he likes and are good for him, like tummy rubs and treats. Hey, you will even provide him with more than what he needs. Why? You love that dog.

In this section about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, he lays out the distinction between himself and the hired help. Jesus is different from the hired help. He isn't just the employee at "Camp Bow Wow." He is the master of this pet. As the master of the pet, or the Good Shepherd, Jesus truly cares for his sheep.

So, what does Jesus do for his sheep as opposed to the hired help? Well, the first distinction is how he responds when threats like wolves come by. When these threats come toward his sheep, he stands firm. The hired helpers would just run away. They wouldn't care about protecting the sheep. Jesus, however, does. Why does he do this? Because they are his sheep. Jesus is not just hired help. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

Another distinction between Jesus and the hired help is that he truly knows his sheep. They are his. They also know him. We know that the master of a pet has a different relationship with that pet than others do. Jesus is the master of his sheep. He knows them.

Finally, we need to wrestle with an interesting, maybe even strange, note about Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd. Five times in these eight verses, Jesus says that he would lay down his life for his sheep. This makes sense as we consider the immense love that Jesus has for his sheep. Jesus loves his sheep so much that he would lay his life down for them. Later in the gospel of John, Jesus describes such immense love by saying, "*No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13). Jesus has this type of amazing love for his sheep.

The perhaps strange aspect of Jesus laying down his life for his sheep is that he would die. Redundant right? But important! A dead shepherd can't do anything for his sheep. So, does he make this like the story of Greyfriars Bobby? Is Jesus just like John Gray? John Gray had a wonderful relationship with his terrier friend. In death, however, John could do nothing for his pet.

The key to Jesus laying down his life is what he says in verses 17 and 18. Jesus would take his life up again. Jesus had willingly gone to die on the cross. Jesus had the authority to take his life back up again as he had been commissioned to do by the Father.

Brothers and sisters, we find comfort in all that Jesus does for us as our Good Shepherd. Jesus feeds us, provides for us, and protects us. This is all comforting and wonderful. The lynchpin to all of it is that Jesus is alive. **You are not the pet of a dead owner.** The resurrected Savior provides good shepherding for you. This is the reality of the resurrection. Your good shepherd is alive and active in laying down his

life. He provided forgiveness for your sins – even the sin of doubting him. In taking it up, he showed that salvation was accomplished.

Your Lord Jesus rose from the grave after three days in the heart of the earth. He now lives. He also rules eternally. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He was placed above all things. He rules for the good of his sheep. This is as it is written in Ephesians 1, *“God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church.”* (Ephesians 1:21). This Good Shepherd is alive and has the power to care for his sheep.

Let us also note that he has not left his sheep alone. First, the Good Shepherd remains with his sheep as he promised to be with them. Jesus said, *“And surely I am with you always until the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20b). The Good Shepherd did not go AWOL. He is with us right now.

Also, the Good Shepherd provides good shepherding. Within this text, Jesus talks about the problems of the hired helpers. These were those who didn't truly care for the sheep that were entrusted into their hands. Now, Jesus provides good under-shepherds to watch over his flock.

Before our Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, he called his apostles to care for his flock. He still sends good shepherds for his flock. The Holy Spirit calls shepherds, or pastors, to care for God's sheep. This was seen in our first reading today. There, Paul said, *“Always keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.”* (Acts 20:28). Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus purchased the flock with his blood as he laid down his life for them. Now, Jesus, who rose from the grave, cares for his sheep. He watches over them. As he lives and rules over them in heaven, he sends pastors to care for the flock.

Consider that for a moment. Your pastors – Pastors Buchholz, Pautz, Pufahl, and myself – are demonstrations of your Good Shepherd's love for you. You are not pets of a dead owner. You belong to the living, resurrected Lord. Now, he cares for you in many ways. One of these is through your pastors.

So, think about the things that your pastors do as Christ's under-shepherds to care for you. Your pastors feed you with the word of Jesus. The message of him who laid his life down for you. Your pastors protect you from dangerous wolves. They warn you about dangerous false teachings and false prophets that look to harm you. Your pastors know you. This is a special blessing in our churches. You actually have a pastor. Your pastors pray for you. Your pastors visit you. Your pastors truly care about you. Finally, your pastors dedicate much of their lives to you. Now, I am not going to stand here and boast about how hard of a worker I am. So, let me use your other pastors as examples. I have seen Pastor Pufahl in the office late at night studying the word so that he can deliver it to you. I have seen Pastor Pautz travel great distances to bring communion to our homebound members. I have heard Pastor Buchholz have difficult conversations with people because he loves them. I have seen your pastors pastoring you.

Now, why do I mention this? Because this is proof that your Good Shepherd still shepherds you. Jesus still cares for you. Jesus provided these shepherds for you. So, Jesus laid his life down and took it back up for you. Then, he sent under-shepherds to carry this forgiveness to you. So, you are forgiven for ever doubting this. Your resurrected Lord provides good shepherding.

Brothers and sisters, **you are not the pet of a dead owner** like Greyfriars Bobby. No! You are the sheep of the Good Shepherd. He laid his life down for you. He took it up again. He saved you. Now, he provides for and protects you as he rules all things. One way he does this is by sending pastors to care for you. What a good shepherd he is! Amen.