



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Easter 4 (A)**  
**April 30, 2023**

**[RCL] Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10**

### **Acts 2:42-47**

Matthias has just been named the twelfth apostle, and Christ has called the twelve into mission. The Holy Spirit has set upon them and they begin their post-resurrection ministry. As the apostles gain believers, small intentional communities begin to form, and the atmosphere seems idyllic—as though the kingdom of heaven has materialized on earth. Believers began to live together in beloved community: eating together, worshipping together, and sharing resources. Each day their numbers increased. It sounds phenomenal. And it was. But it's important to consider context here. Christ has not been gone for very long, and the believers are actively awaiting his return. They believe it is imminent, within their lifetime. And so, even their hardships seem short-lived and bearable, because they know that relief is near—eternal rest in Christ's kingdom.

Christ *will* come again. But when? How much more bearable hardships would be if we could predict their ending! And life was hard in ancient Israel; only a few months passed before the first martyrdom set in motion a wave of brutal persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. This passage from Acts can teach us both *hope* and the power of faith. We know beloved community is possible. We know that it works. And we have faith that we *will* find it again.

- How do you recognize elements of Beloved Community in your life?
- Imagine for a moment that Christ will return in your lifetime. How would that transform your day-to-day living?

### **Psalm 23**

In times of trial, we humans tend to lean into comfort-seeking behaviors: a close friend in whom to confide, a warm fluffy blanket to wrap around ourselves, a favorite show to take our mind off of things, even if only temporarily, a comforting cup of tea. But a comforting psalm? Yes. Psalms are relatable. They poetically iterate the emotions bound up in our raw humanity. Psalms express our fear of enemies, our lament over hardships, our joy in triumph, and our determination and faith during times of trial. Psalm 23 expresses the idyllic state of God's love for us, while at the same time acknowledging the ever-present dangers in our earthly human lives. We are comforted by God's unwavering love for us. As we tread through the deserts and valleys of life, God provides wisdom and sustenance. God blesses us and gives us hope. This psalm comforts us in times of trial by acknowledging that, though we stray like lost sheep, God is always present, speaking to us – we only need to listen.

- How does Psalm 23 speak to you?
- Are there times when you still fear evil, even though you know that God is with you?

## 1 Peter 2:19-25

The significance of this passage is its pastoral approach to a timeless hardship. This letter is written by a disciple of Peter to newly converted Christians who are struggling through the difficulties of being exiled from their communities. Where they once had privilege, they now find exclusion and abuse. They have, in a sense, entered an unfamiliar wilderness, a liminal space within the margins of society. From one side, they stand abhorred and scourged, unwanted by popular society. From the other side, they are sheep of a fold being guided under the care of the Great Shepherd, beloved and cared for, but susceptible to wolves and all sorts of dangers because of their faith.

This letter offers buoyancy and hope, not in the here and now, but in their future within God's heavenly dwelling. It reminds them (and us) of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us, an innocent Lamb who committed *no* sin, yet gave his life for the forgiveness of *our* sins. Our sacrifice is in our steady trust and praise to God, regardless of our circumstance. Psalm 23 expresses this well: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me." God is with us, and that is what Peter is assuring the oppressed. Have faith in the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:25).

- When have you felt exiled?
- The communities to whom Peter is writing are being abused because of their faith, and Peter is encouraging them to persevere. Do you find this letter encouraging? What would encourage *you* to persevere amid the abuse?

## John 10:1-10

"I am the gate," Jesus said. He tells us that anyone who enters the sheepfold – which has only one entryway – by any means other than through the gate is a bandit. Sheepfolds are designed for protection. Sheep may safely rest within their walls, finding sanctuary behind the gate, which is guarded by the gatekeeper: God. This metaphor would have been very relatable to the earliest Christians as shepherding was an integral part of their culture. Protecting the sheep meant that there was food to eat and fiber for clothing. It meant survival.

The gate offers life, and likewise, Christ offers life. Through Christ, "the guardian [or gate] of our souls," we find the promise of sanctuary and everlasting life. In this earthly life, we are faced with innumerable things vying for our attention, distracting us, and leading us astray. All the while, Christ-the-Gate stands open, welcoming us into his sheepfold. There is no shortcut; only through Christ-the-Gate may we enter God's kingdom, and it won't be easy getting there. But there is hope: "Though [we] walk through the valley of the shadow of death," we are not alone. Following the still, small voice of our Creator and Redeemer, we will make our way to the Gate of Salvation and we *will* find sanctuary.

- What earthly distractions lead you astray, away from Christ-the-Gate?
- How do you hear the voice of our Creator calling you to Christ-the-Gate?
- Where do you see threads of connectivity between this day's scripture readings?

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