

The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
 April 25, 2021  
 First Lutheran Church  
 St. Joseph, MO  
 Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It is somewhat surprising how we sometimes learn things about people at their funerals that we did know about them before—particularly when it involves people we thought we knew pretty well. A number of years ago my wife Debra and I were at the funeral of her Uncle Eugene, the last of four brothers of whom Debra's father was one. Although we had not seen Uncle Eugene for several years before he died, Debra was pretty close to him while she was growing up and we were with him regularly when we lived in Ohio. So, we were surprised to learn some things about Uncle Eugene at his funeral that we had not known before.

For example, we knew that Uncle Eugene had been a company pilot for years at Montgomery Ward and that he had learned to fly in his service during World War II in the Army Air Corp. What we didn't know was that Eugene had first been drafted into the infantry and that while in training in Arkansas, he saw a recruiting poster for the Air Corp. The poster showed a fighter with six machine guns going at once. Uncle Eugene understood that, as an infantryman, you only shot one gun at a time. He figured that being able to shoot six would be a lot better than shooting one, so, he decided to enlist in the Air Corp.

We knew that Eugene flew bombers in the Air Corp. We knew he had been stationed in Northern Africa and flew missions over Europe. What we didn't know was that he had been seriously wounded in action. On one mission his plane had caught ground fire from below. The gunfire came up through the cockpit and the pilot's seat. Eugene was so badly wounded that the co-pilot had to take control of the plane. He spent the next several weeks in a hospital bed in Cairo, Egypt, and it was there, not knowing if he was going to live or die, that he wrote a poem—a poem we had never seen before—a poem that was really a prayer. And it went like this:

*Do you remember me, my God?  
 When I was just a child  
 when I was very little  
 and my soul was undefiled  
 I prayed to you with folded hands  
 and with my head bowed low  
 and asked you for your grace and strength  
 wherever I might go.  
 And then I learned about the world  
 and all its sinful ways  
 and I was tempted and sinned  
 for many nights and days.  
 The years have wrought their changes, God,  
 and I am not the same  
 and well I realize in my heart  
 that I am much to blame.  
 But when you judge my record, God,  
 with all the facts compiled  
 please hear again the prayers I said  
 when I was just a child.*

As I sat and listened to that poem being read at his funeral, I thought to myself that this is something Jesus would never want Eugene to wonder or worry about. Whether it be when he was in his twenties and lying wounded in a hospital bed in Cairo, or when he was nearly ninety and dying in a nursing home in Texas, Jesus would never want Eugene to wonder how God would remember him. Jesus' message to us is clear: God always remembers us in love and grace. However we might be judged, however it is we have lived our lives, God's love is something from which we are never separated. God's grace is something that never will be taken away.

In the gospel this morning Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd." In hearing this, we often focus on what it means for Jesus to be our shepherd—how Jesus guides and leads us. This is quite fine, but I think Jesus' emphasis is on the word "good"—"I am the *good* shepherd." In other words, there are many shepherds who can guide us in our living, many voices that can lead us and influence us, but Jesus is calling us to know he is the *good* guide, his is the *good* voice. Jesus wants us to know that he is always doing what is good for us—that God is always doing what is good for us. This is a goodness in which we can trust. This is a goodness upon which we can rely.

At one point Jesus compared it to the love a parent has for a child. In so many words Jesus said that if we as parents know what is good for our children, and if we as parents seek to do what is good for our children, how much more does God know what is good for us and how much more does God do what is good for us. We may get mad with our children. We may get frustrated with our children. But we will always love our children and we will always seek to do what is good for our children. So, too, and even more, does God always love us and seek to do what is good for us.

As we celebrate this season of Easter, I find this is the most compelling reason to trust in the resurrection. I may not understand resurrection. In and of itself, I may find it hard to believe in resurrection. But if I as a parent had the power to give life to my dead child, would I not do that? Of course I would—and God has such power. God has the power of life. God is the power of life. So, I believe in the resurrection because I believe in the love of God, and I believe in the goodness of God. This is a love and goodness there for us not only in our dying, but it is also a love and goodness there for us in our living.

There was once a businessman from Milwaukee who attended a day-long meeting in Chicago with several of his co-workers. As he kissed his wife good-bye in the morning, she reminded him of an important dinner engagement they had that evening. He assured her as he left that he would be home in time for dinner.

Well, the meeting ran longer than scheduled. By the time it was over, this man and his associates had to run to the train station in order to catch the train which would get him home on time for dinner. As they were hurrying and pushing their way through the crowded station, one of them knocked over a table full of apples a young boy was selling to commuters.

As his companions started to board the train, the man had a twinge of guilt, so, he stopped and went back to help the boy pick up the apples. He was glad he did, because when he went back, he found out that the boy who was selling them was blind. As he gathered the apples he saw that many of them had been ruined, so, he reached into his pocket and handed the boy a ten-dollar bill, saying he was sorry and hoped the boy would forgive him and his associates. The boy was amazed at what he was doing, and as the man walked away, the boy asked him, "Are you Jesus?"

Having now missed the train his companions had boarded, this businessman caught the next one bound for Milwaukee. Alone with his thoughts, he laughed a little at the boy's parting question. Then he thought about how typical that incident had been in relation to his life. He is running, running all the time, running ... until something happens that makes him stop for a minute. Maybe this blind child could see something he could not. At that point, the boy's question began to make him uncomfortable. "Are you Jesus?" Of course, he wasn't

Jesus—most of the time he was running too fast to be Jesus. But maybe he should be Jesus—and maybe to this boy he had been.

“We know love by this,” the author of the first letter of John reminds us, “We know love by this, that he (Jesus) laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” When we baptize infant children into the faith, we turn to their parents and essentially ask them to lay down their lives for their child. We tell them that the Christ their child will first come to know will be the Christ their child sees in them. We then ask them to make promises on their child’s behalf—promises that say they will show their child the way of Christ—that they will show their child the way of love. Then we turn to the child’s godparents and ask the very same thing of them. Then we ask the same thing of the entire community. How will this child come to know love, we ask? He or she will come to know love by this: by the way we lay down our lives for them.

In death and in life, Jesus is guiding us into the good. He is guiding us into the way of love. Being an Easter people means to trust in this guiding, and it means to live in this good.