

The Celebration of the Life of John Monroe Ray
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
18 March 2023

Welcome to the celebration of the life of John Monroe Ray. Today you and I together, will meet Jesus of Nazareth, the Good Shepherd, in the land of the Gerasenes. This Good Shepherd who lost his sheep is willing to give up his life to find the one who has gotten lost. And he is willing to give his life because the sheep belong to him, and he belongs to them, and he knows them all by name, and he can recognize each of them in a crowd. And because he knows them so very well, when these sheep get lost, he knows exactly where he must go to find them and to restore them to the heard. And he knows it is within the nature of sheep to wander into dangerous territories and to walk away from those who love them and care for them. And he knows that sometimes, it is not the sheep's fault to wander off, to walk away from those who love them and care for them. He knows it is within the nature of sheep to be rebellious, and to try to discover unknown territories, places that, perhaps, they have no business visiting. But the Good Shepherd knows that sometime sheep wander, and that sometimes they get in a pickle from which they need to be rescued, as a result of their wandering.

This is why the Good Shepherd travels throughout Galilee, and he travels throughout the Samaritan deserts, and he travels in Judea, looking for the sheep that have wandered off. And today, he travels to the land of the Gerasenes, across from the Sea of Galilee, Gentile territory, one of the ten cities. These folks were considered by the Jews to be unclean, to be outside of the promises of the Covenant, outside of the promises of Messiah. And he goes to the land of the Gerasenes because he knows that there too many of his sheep have gotten lost, and have wandered off. So, he gets in his boat and he travels to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and he lands on the other side. As he is walking with his disciples, a voice cries out from behind the gravestones of a cemetery. This voice is crying out with loud cries of anguish. Whereas you and I have grown up to know that two plus two equal four, at some point in his life that voice began to think that two plus two equals twenty-seven.

He doesn't know why. None of us know why. Neither his family nor his neighborhood friends, nor the people in his community he grew up with, no one in his former life knows why that is the case, but in his mind he knows, as surely as he knows today is Saturday, March 18, my third year anniversary of the first time I preached from this pulpit, that two plus two equal twenty-seven. And he also knows that if he wears any clothes he will burn with heat, so he is naked behind the tombstones. And he also knows that he must avoid all types of people and hide from them, otherwise he would not be protected. He also believes that if he doesn't wake up every morning and blesses himself twenty-seven times, those closes to him in the land of the Gerasenes would die of an instantaneous heart attack. But not just twenty-seven blessings, but twenty-seven perfectly calculated blessings: Eight inches from the forehead to the chest, eight inches from the left to the right side of his chest, in perfect harmony of speed and gesture.

Anything less than perfect blessings would cause the death of his family and friends in the land of the Gerasenes. Everyone in town laughs at that, it makes no sense to them. But to this particular sheep, the act of blessing himself becomes the primary responsibility of his life every single day. He doesn't understand it, he doesn't know why. All he knows is that he must avoid the town, he must be completely naked, he must bless himself twenty-seven times a day, and he must avoid people.

So, when this lost sheep hiding in that cemetery sees a strange man walking by with his disciples, he becomes filled with terror and fear. And he begins to scream, "What to you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus turns and looks at him, locking eyes with him, and recognizes him immediately, because he too is one of his sheep. In fact, he is the very reason why Jesus is in the land of the Gerasenes today to begin with. And Jesus looks at him and he sees a disorganized mind. He sees someone who has wandered very far away, and now he wears the scars and the dirt of a man he has wandered into many dangerous areas where he had no business going. Jesus knows it is not his fault, he knows it is not an intentional parting from, it is not an intentional abandonment of family and friends, and not an intentional abandonment of community. Jesus knows that something is broken inside this sheep's mind, and although his behaviors appear very, very strange to the rest of us, to him they make sense, and through his actions he is saving the very lives of those he loves. And Jesus calls whatever voices afflict the man's head, "demons." And I, as a Clinical Social Worker for 28 years, I can tell you that I quite like the idea of calling mental illness's voices, images, and flight of ideas and intrusive thoughts that make no sense to anyone but the person himself, "demons." Because that is a good metaphor for them. They terrorize you and enslave you, and they capture you and confuse you, and they lead you into thought patterns and images for which you were not born, nor created. They place you in a unique hell of their own making.

Jesus looks at him and says, "Leave him!" And all at once, all of these voices leave: The disorganization, the patterns, the obsessive turning and unturning, washing and rewashing, all of the madness of his life is suddenly gone. And there, all at once, in that glimpse of recognition, Jesus sees the acolyte who paraded down these isles and the isles of the parish hall, carrying the same crucifix the acolyte carried today, since he was a little kid all the way to his graduation from High School, week after week, with perfect devotion and perfect love. And Jesus remembers him and says, "I remember you and Anne carrying those torches down the aisle, in order to come and worship me at the Altar, I remember you! I remember your faith and your devotion. I remember your love for your mom and dad and your sister. I remember your dreams and your aspirations. I remember all your grandiose dreams about what you would become one day. I remember your military service. I remember your sacrifice and your anguish. Be Free, be free! Find in your mind the organization, the cleverness, and the smarts that made you a brilliant student in High School. Find it again! Find in your heart all the love and understanding, the ability to listen that made you a magnetic personality around your friends.

Everywhere you went, you had an army of people following you, and they would hang on every word of your stories, and they would laugh at your silliness, and loved your humor. You were so popular and you had so many friends. Find that again, because for that you were created! Be free, be sane, be healthy, be loved.”

There is practice among some shepherds in the Middle East, when one of their sheep gets lost, and they find him, and they are often covered in muck and feces and dirt, these shepherds wash that sheep clean by hand to make it white and pure once again before they reunite this sheep to the rest of the heard, so that the other animals don't turn away from it, repelled by the smell and the sight. So, they may be welcome back into the fold. This is exactly what Jesus of Nazareth did the day John died. He welcomed him and bathed him, and took care of him and dressed him with his own robes, and said, “Welcome, oh blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the world was created. So many of you remember a John who was hiding behind the gravestones in the metaphorical land of the Gerasenes. But in Jesus' mind he is sixteen or seventeen, he is dressed in white robes, carrying a cross to the Altar to worship him. He remembers a John without O.C.D. In Jesus' mind he was never older than twenty and he was healthy, at the very top of his faculties. And that is how Jesus loved him, that's how Jesus remembered him, and that is the same John who is with Jesus this very day and at this very moment. So, if you care here trying to mourn a tragedy, you are at the wrong place. I want you here celebrating a great victory. And I want you with shouts of joy and acclamation to give thanks to this shepherd who has gone all the way into enemy territory to rescue one of his, who has restored him to perfect health, who has loved him as his beloved child, who has welcomed him into his presence.

So, we know where John is and we know who he is with. The only question left is about us. How about us who are still walking through the valley of the shadow of death? How about us, who are still living in a land of sin, and sometimes betrayal, and sometimes misunderstanding, and financial and physical reversals? How about us who are still in this valley of tears? This funeral is for us, it is not for John. In fact, John is this very moment in Paradise, looking at all of us from there, blessing us with his beautiful smile. This is not about him; he is where he needs to be. This is about us because we are forgetful people, because we forget that we are finite, we all carry a sand clock that is turned the moment we are born, and the sand is running out. And we forget that we too will die, some sooner than later, but we all will meet our maker in due time. So, as we celebrate John's life, let me ask you a few uncomfortable questions, “How is the quality of the relationships with the people God has placed in your life? How are you doing keeping up with those commitments you have made throughout your life? If your life needs a little repair, if it needs a little turning back, if it needs a little asking for forgiveness, and saying the ‘I love you’ we sometimes fail to say. Today is the day to leave this church, go out there, and begin to repair what has been broken and begin to mend what needs to be advanced. Today is the day to hug a little tighter, the day to say “I love you!” Today is the day to say, “Will you forgive me?”

This absence between us and John is temporary. We will see him soon enough, for where he is, we will be, because his Redeemer is our Redeemer, his Shepherd is our Shepherd. And this Shepherd knows that some of us get often lost in the corporate ladder and we forget our humanity. Sometimes some of us lose our hope and our faith and become bitter, angry, and jaded. He knows that some of us are more concerned with Wallstreet than we are with his Kingdom, or our neighbors. He knows all of that and he is neither repelled, nor does he run away in shame of you. Just the opposite, he approaches you. And this very day, he will be looking for you in your offices, in your kitchens, in your bedrooms, and in your gardens. Turn around and see him standing there, and abandon yourself into his hands. He has come to rescue you. He has come to clean you. He has come to bring you to where he is. Amen!