

Fourth Sunday in Easter
April 26, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Two Sundays ago, Father John Pitzer preached a fine sermon on hope. The gospel text that day was the story of the Apostle Thomas and his encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

John suggested that Thomas was not really a doubter, he was a seeker. In the midst of the chaotic and dangerous world of Roman-occupied Palestine, a world where despair and cynicism flourished under a people living under an authoritarian boot, Thomas was searching for hope. And he, in fact, got the most hopeful sign he could imagine, the resurrected Jesus.

His friend and teacher appeared right in front of him, wounds and all. And Jesus said, peace be with you. Hope was right in front of his eyes.

So now, let's widen the lens and move from the individual to the communal. What would it mean for us to be a people of hope, a community of hope, right here at Trinity Church? One thing it would certainly mean is that we don't have to live in hopelessness. The forces of darkness and chaos don't have to overwhelm us.

We have our own role to play in bringing the light of Christ into this broken world. Hope is a verb. Hope is active.

Hope is not passive. And we are a community of hope right here at Trinity because we gather around the name of Jesus. After all, as John's Gospel says time and again, it's these communities that Jesus gives his life for.

John's Gospel offers us a familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and what a community gathered in the name of the Good Shepherd looks like. But just before the image of the Good Shepherd, John offers us another image. Jesus says, very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus' description of himself as the gate and then as the Good Shepherd come immediately following a confrontation with the Pharisees where he's healed a man born blind from birth.

And in that confrontation Jesus had said, I am the light of the world. So Jesus' description of himself as the light of the world, the gate, and the Good Shepherd need to be read together to get the full picture of who Jesus understands himself to be. You know, the lectionary does us no favors by separating those three passages.

When we read those passages together we truly understand who Jesus is telling us he is. Now in that first story, the story of the man born blind from birth, which we read a few Sundays back, Jesus and his friends encounter a man who had been born blind from birth. And the friends question whose fault it was that this man had been born blind from birth in the first place.

Was it his fault for being a sinner? Or was it his parents fault for being sinners? I mean, it had to be somebody's fault, didn't it? I mean, blame has to be assigned, right? But Jesus helps his friends reframe that. Sin, you see, isn't about what you do or what you don't do. Sin is about separation from God.

To be a follower of Jesus, which really means to be a follower of God, means to shape your life after Jesus's life. To allow Jesus's life to become the pattern or the blueprint for your own life. And that's where salvation, which you remember means

nothing more and nothing less than health and wholeness and completeness, that's where salvation lies.

That's where abundant life lies. And to be out of that flow, well that's where sin lies. So Jesus gets down to business.

He spits in the dirt, makes a mud pie, and rubs it in the man's eyes. And now, after a lifetime of blindness, the man can see. Now, this of course outrages the Pharisees when they hear about it.

How can this man Jesus, whom they consider to be a sinner himself because he didn't meet their definition of righteousness, how could this man perform the works of God? You remember what the Pharisees problem was? Their problem was their self-righteousness. Their problem was their arrogance. Their problem was the assumption that they had all the answers.

That they were right and everybody else was wrong. All that blinded them to see God at work in the world. Their arrogance and their self-righteousness blinded them to the abundant life right in front of their eyes.

They were truly the blind ones. The man born blind, on the other hand, he got it. He could see.

The man said, Lord, I believe. And he received life and received it abundantly. For him, abundant life meant seeing after a lifetime of blindness.

You know, the turning point of this story was when the man said, yes Lord I believe. Yes Lord I trust. Yes Lord I want to follow.

And then Jesus says, I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see. And those who do see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and they said to him, surely we are not blind are we? Jesus said to him, if you were blind you would not have sin.

But now that you say we see, your sin remains. In other words, as long as they arrogantly and self-righteously insist that they see, they actually remain blind. Blind to the truth of the light that's come into the world.

Immediately following this story comes Jesus's description of himself as both the gate to the sheepfold and as the Good Shepherd. The arrogant, self-righteous Pharisees are like the thieves and bandits preying on the innocent sheep. Their self-righteousness gets in the way of having life in abundance.

It puts them outside the gate. But here's the thing, the gate to the sheepfold is always ready to open for any sheep. Not just the ones who are already followers, any sheep who want to come in.

For anyone who wants to trust, for anyone who wants to be a follower, the gate to the sheepfold is always open. Life in abundance. For the blind man it was having his eyes open.

Life abundant meant being able to see. For the Pharisees it would have meant dropping the pretense of being all-knowing, acknowledging their need for deeper insight. What about you? What would it look like for you to live life abundantly? Let me be real clear about this, it won't be the same for everyone.

What is the same for everyone though is this. Whatever abundant life looks like for you, the way to get there is through the gate. The gate to the sheepfold where you'll be welcomed by Jesus the Good Shepherd.

So let's circle back to the original question of what it means to be a people of hope living in a community of hope. The images of Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold and the Good Shepherd are intensely relational. These images don't mean anything without the presence of the sheep.

That is, these images don't tell us who Jesus is, they tell us who Jesus is in relation to the ones who follow him. The identity of Jesus and the identity of the community that gathers around him are completely linked. So what image of community life is

being suggested here? First let's be real clear that none of the ones who follow Jesus are shepherds themselves.

In discussing this passage in class one day one of my seminary professors said to the gathered students, friends I hate to disappoint you but none of you are called to be junior shepherds. Which is what lots of those earnest young seminarians imagined themselves to be. Instead the ones who gather around Jesus are called to understand themselves as members of the flock.

The ones who share in the knowledge of the relationship between God and Jesus. Now our relationship to Jesus is modeled on Jesus's relationship to God. Listening to Jesus's voice and following him is how the community receives abundant life but most importantly the community that gathers around Jesus understands itself through the gift of Jesus's life for them.

The gift of Jesus's life holds together the images of gate and shepherd. See Jesus can be both things. Through his death he shows the way to life, I mean that's the gate image, and he offers abundant life by the example of his love, that's the shepherd image.

It's important here to say that Jesus lays down his life for the sheep, not just for his sheep. His gift is for everyone, completely inclusive, never never exclusive. So what does it mean for the church? What does it mean for this church, this Trinity Church to live as Jesus's sheep? What does it mean to be followers of the light of the world who's also the one who has laid down his life for the sheep? What does it mean to take up our crosses and follow? One thing for sure is that following Jesus is where hope lies.

We can find the resiliency to move beyond despair and apathy, to move beyond the darkness that seems to be surrounding us in this moment in every corner. We can move beyond that to confront the darkness and be lightbearers in this confused and conflicted world. You know, I believe that our deepest desires as human beings are to know and be known and to love and be loved.

Think about that for a minute, to know and be known, to love and be loved. Do those desires speak to your heart? They sure speak to mine, to know and be known, to love and be loved. I know my own and my own know me, says Jesus.

My dear friends in Christ, you are known and you are loved in a culture that values individualism and secularism, in a culture where loneliness and isolation and anxiety and hopelessness leaf out at us from the phone screens in our hands. The one who's the light of the world, the one who's the Good Shepherd, offers us another way. He knows us and he loves us.

He knows us and he invites us to know our neighbors. He loves us and he gives us the courage to love, even the ones who are hard to love. So we make sure that we do our part to keep the Christ light burning, even when things seem blacker than night.

We make sure our doors are always open to everyone, even to the strangest-looking sheep. And we make sure that all those sheep are fed and clothed. We make sure that we offer protection for the weakest ones among us, from the bandits and thieves who might prey upon them.

Our great high calling at Trinity Church is to be a community of hope in the name of the Good Shepherd. The search process for calling the next rector to this great parish is underway. Stay tuned.

It's a time of transition. It's a time of change. A time to move from one age to the next.

Will you look with nostalgia and longing to the past? Or will you look with courage and hope to the future? I know what my prayer for Trinity will be. I choose hope.

Amen.