

“Look to Him and Be Radiant!”

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

Pastor Deborah Birkeland

Psalm 34: 5a and John 14: 1-6

Believe it or not, I had a relationship with a cow! Yes, a milk cow was one of my best friends when I was a young girl living on our farm in northern Minnesota! My dad had a “special” name for her that is not fit to be shared in a church! It was because she could be a bit stubborn, even mean, but to me, she was a sweetie! She was known to kick when someone tried to milk her, and her tail often swished across your face in angry defiance, but there was something about her tenacious spirit that resonated with me. She made me smile, and we got along just fine.

Perhaps that is why it was so hard for me the day I found her lying bloated and near death in the pasture. She had eaten too much fresh alfalfa, my father explained, and gases in her stomach had overtaken her system. There wasn't anything to be done. I remember how terribly hard it was for me to say good-bye to that sweet, but challenging cow. Life on a farm had taught me that the good Lord giveth and taketh away, and I had seen many animals die, but somehow, my connection to this cow made it so much harder.

Saying goodbye is not easy. Jesus knew that, and so do we. I chose to preach today on John's beloved text because it models one of the most beautiful gifts we have as God's children when the time comes in our lives to say good bye to those we love. I have used this text often with families at the bedside of a loved one; I have used it in services that celebrate life and resurrection when someone has died. And I choose to use it today, my last Sunday as one of your pastors, because it is NOT a sad text, but one of the most intimately hopeful and joyful witnesses to the power of God's love I could imagine to share as I say my own goodbye's to all of you.

Place yourselves in this tender scene with me. Its just hours before Jesus was taken into custody and crucified by a world jealous and fearful of his ability to love. Jesus was gathered in an upper room with his beloved disciples...his best friends on earth. He just finished washing their feet, modeling for them what it truly means to love others as God has loved you. And now, He tells them the truth, that even one of them would be an instrument of betrayal, and that he would be swept up into a frenzy of evil and given over to death. But he also tells them that what the world does for evil, God will change to good. As WE stand here on this side of Easter and resurrection glory, we understand what he meant.

But Peter, who didn't understand at all, can't bear this truth. He is a man of action. He wants to follow Jesus no matter what, but Jesus tells him, “*Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.*” This isn't good enough for Peter. “*I will lay down my life for you!*” says Peter. And with love and understanding in his heart, Jesus

tells Peter that even their relationship will be tested, for Peter will deny he even knows him not once, but three times before the cock crows.

This is the setting then, for the most comforting, loving words Jesus could have possibly given as he says goodbye to those he must now leave behind. *“Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me.”* When I hear these words, I imagine a strong, but gentle parent lifting a crying child into their arms and holding them close. *“Hush, hush now my sweet baby. It will be all right. You will get through this, and trust me, a much better day is coming.”*

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He also understands the empty space that is created when we must say good-bye. In that moment, what has been real, comfortable, safe, and trustable is being wrenched away. There isn't anything to take its place so those grieving cannot imagine going on without it. So Jesus graciously paints a picture envisioning something new, something that rebuilds hope, conquers fear and provides a bridge to what only God fully understands, the mystery of eternal life and eternal joy. With a stroke of his hand, Jesus paints a vision. *“In my Father's house are many mansions...many dwelling places...many cozy rooms, and I go to prepare a place for YOU!”*

Which one of us here today could imagine the hardship of homelessness? Home is the place where one belongs. Where you can eat, relax, rest and be yourself without worry, even stay in pajamas all day if you so choose! It is a place where you express yourself as you decorate and furnish the rooms. It is a place where you care for God's creation by mowing the lawn and planting flowers. It is the place where you bring your children, grandchildren and pets to be nourished, sustained, and given opportunities to learn and thrive. To be without a home means that we wander aimlessly, fearfully, hopelessly, and must rely on less reliable circumstances for our needs to be met. Jesus did not want to leave his friends homeless, or abandoned. He wanted to give them a future to cling to when the tempests of life and following the Spirit's lead as the church of the living Christ would challenge them beyond their imagination. *“You know the way,”* said Jesus. But we DON'T know the way Lord? How can we find our home with you someday? Imagine that sense of confusion, loss, and bewilderment. How can we move forward? What steps do we take? What if we get lost or confused?

Another childhood memory comes to my mind, this time with sheep. I also had lots of relationships with sheep, especially baby lambs. Often, we had what we called bottle lambs whose mothers weren't able to provide milk for their young. They would come running to the fence to nibble at our fingers and eagerly drink from a large coke bottle with a large nipple and filled with warm milk. These lambs would follow us around like puppies, baaing for our time and attention. And I loved them. That is until they grew up and had to stay with the herd! Now our relationship got in the way of their adult lives. When we would try to move the entire herd of sheep from one pasture to the next so that they could find food and water, those spoiled and needy lambs, now big and wooly, would stray or run away from the rest of the sheep, aimlessly running helter skelter, feeling entitled to special treatment and care. That is what Peter is like. He is so

eager to show his love for his Lord that he wants special consideration. Jesus knew that he would have some hard lessons to learn. Yet, ultimately the relationship they had would also mean that Peter would come to himself and find that deep strength and wisdom to lead in his own right. He would become the ROCK upon which Christ would build his church on earth.

And then, as if this weren't enough, there are the other amazing words that Jesus offers. *"I will come back, and take you to myself so that where I am, so you may be also."* You see Jesus doesn't see goodbye as something that lasts forever. Rather, it is a season...a time when seeds planted and nourished are now given wing to grow and produce a harvest that cannot be squelched. The power of God to bring newness of life is unstoppable, and it is incarnated anew with the presence of the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth and fulfillment of the vision God in Christ has painted in our hearts. *"I am the way, the truth and the life...follow me, and I will show you the way."* How can our hearts truly be sad when we have such a painting of glory and promise to light our paths?

Yet, saying goodbye, even for a season, is not easy. It can be painful, and it can bring a sense of sadness and bewilderment. This is called grief, and grief too is a season. Grief, however, is not the enemy...but the "paint thinner" to move us forward toward tomorrow. As we let go, we also LET GOD. For you see, ONLY God can fill our cup with what we truly need....a trust that never lets us go; promise that provides a safe haven we call home; and a pathway forward that is lit with brilliant light and hope.

As I say goodbye for now to all of you in this wonderful place called Christ the King; and as I thank God for the path that has taken me to Shepherd of the Hills in Shoreview and Zion Lutheran in Chisago City, I want to paint one last picture for you to hold in your hearts.

When I was a child, I took responsibilities seriously. I was the oldest of six siblings and given lots of chores to do, children, animals and neighbors to care for, and expectations to be "doing" something productive each and every day. Sometimes, I would grow weary of carrying so much responsibility. I would comfort my brothers and sisters when they cried or would be afraid, and as I realized how hard my parents worked too, I would wonder, who will comfort me? I would go out in the dark in the middle of the night to check the cattle in labor during calving season and wonder, if I get hurt and don't return, will someone know where I am and come and help me? Now, I am sure that EVERY first born, especially those raised on a working farm or in a challenging childhood would be able to relate. I had wonderful, hard working parents, but life was hard work. There was little time for freedom and fun. Yet, we found it when we could.

I found it in a cornfield! When I could slip away from my chores and responsibilities, I discovered that if I entered the cornfield next to our garden by the potato patch, walked in a dozen rows, turned to my right and took 20 steps, I had a little spot all to myself where I could set up a little room of sorts. I brought out an old blanket, my

favorite book, and a little pillow and I would lay down among those corn stalks and gaze at the sky. It was there that I felt Christ's presence comforting me, giving me courage, hope and a dream of my own. I remember thinking that I should ask God for just one attribute that I wanted most of all in my future rather than success and things. It seemed in my mind to be the "responsible" thing to do...ask for something truly noble and usable in his world. And so, after gazing at the clouds and soaking in the warmth of love sparkling through the shimmering leaves as the sunshine hit my face, I asked for the gift of KINDNESS. I wanted above all to be KIND. And I chose a favorite verse during my childhood that has been with me all of my life, and continues to be my anchor verse today. It comes from Psalm 34 where the psalmist writes, *"I sought the Lord and he answered me, He delivered me from all my fears. Look to Him and be radiant..."* Radiant! Radiant Kindness! Yes, I thought, that's the vision God has for me to trust and to share.

I would like to report that I was instantly kind from that moment on! But, the truth is, I am also a bit like Peter! I have needed to learn some hard lessons about what it means to be truly kind but dealing with my own UNKINDNESS. I learned that kindness comes at the price of humility, and not pride. God has been faithful in that vision and promise through his tenacious, redeeming forgiveness and grace. In my call to ministry, I learned I was to be a shepherd, but not a lead pastor. I learned I was to listen and to understand the heart of God's children, and if I did, the Holy Spirit would give me the gift of kindness, and it would radiate God's love into his world.

And so, today, I say goodbye for now. Goodbye and thank you from the bottom of my heart for embracing the gifts and callings that God has painting in my life and making them your own. You are blessed beyond your imaginings, my dear friends, and you need to trust the vision God is painting for your future. God has taken away shepherds, but also given shepherds. Trust them, receive them, love them, and love one another. For you too have the calling to serve out of your gifts, and to offer one another the means of grace.

As I leave today...I want to give you a gift to remind you to look to Christ...and be radiant! Whether it is hung in my old office where congregation care will continue utilizing the exciting talents of lay shepherds and ministers, or is hung somewhere else of your choice, I pray the humble efforts of my unskilled artistic hands will somehow unleash the radiant kindness among you into your future. God Bless and keep you always, and remember than invisible sting, our baptism, that unites and keeps us together in Christ always. Amen.