

A Unique Easter?

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Now, I'd like to go back for a little while this morning to John chapter 10, that Rowan read earlier. And Thomas last week looked at the earlier part of that section, particularly about Jesus being the good shepherd who brings life and what that meant. I'm going to look at the second half, from verse 14 onwards, and relate it very strongly, I hope, to the fact that this is Easter, this is Easter weekend, where we recall that on Friday, on the Friday, Good Friday, strange in many ways to call it Good Friday, isn't it? The death of someone, but it was the death of the Son of God, which ultimately was the greatest good that has ever been done. And then he was in the grave until the third day, which is today, Sunday, and he rose from the dead. So that's the kind of theme we're going to look at today. And I've entitled this a unique Easter question mark, because I think for many of us in the world in which we are living just now, it does seem like a unique Easter for us. And yet, it's not as unique and significant as the first Easter that we have. Now Easter has lots of connotations for people in many ways, and not all of them religious, of course, for some people, it's spring flowers, which we have to brighten up the pulpit area today.

And people will think about daffodils and all different kinds of spring flowers for other peoples. It's Easter eggs, and I'm going to enjoy my Smarties Easter egg later. And you may wonder how I got that, because it's not an essential item, but I'm a key worker, so I have privileges. And then some people think about new birth and lambs skipping in the hills and in the fields at Easter time. And that's getting nearer to what we're going to look at today. Sort of. We're going to sort of talk about lambs, well, a little bit anyway. Or not so much lambs as sheep and shepherds and why Jesus uses that illustration, because so often in the New Testament, Jesus uses illustrations, pictures that were very common to the people that were listening to him, to get across everyday truth, to get across real truth using everyday illustrations, using pictures. I don't think I'd do nearly enough of that, and it's a weakness. I think pictures are a great way, illustrations are a great way of getting across truth. And he often used sheep and shepherding and being a good shepherd, which you read about in this chapter. He uses that often to illustrate truths about who he was and the relationship he had with his people. And also the world in which we live. And that was a very common profession, a very common site in Palestine in the days of Jesus. People got it, people understood it. And people could make connections, sometimes they couldn't make spiritual connections, but they could understand what Jesus was trying to say from a human point of view. Now, we might struggle with some of these illustrations today because many of us are city dwellers. It's not so common for us to understand and know about sheep and shepherds. And even when we do know, I've got a brother-in-law who's a shepherd in the Highlands, and even when we do know a little bit about sheep and shepherding, it might not quite capture what Jesus is trying to convey, because shepherding in Palestine was done in a different context to what it is here in Scotland. And the key difference really is the conditions in which shepherding was done, and sometimes the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. But I think Jesus often uses the example of shepherding and sheep because sheep were looked after by shepherds in a desert context. The conditions that they lived in were primarily desert conditions. Now, at certain times of the year, the desert, not often, but at certain times of the year when the rains fell, was a place of extreme beauty and of great bounty. The grasses would grow up and the shepherds would find pasture for their sheep, and it would be warm and it would be a place of beauty and plenty. But for most of the time, it was barren and isolated and dangerous, a dangerous place to be and a dangerous place to look after a flock of sheep. There were bandits who would kill the sheep and take them, and there was also wild animals. So the shepherd's job was 24-7, and it was often involved in seeking out food and water for the flock, having the flock follow him, know him, be protected by him. And the sheep pen would have been something

that was very tightly protected from wild animals and from bandits. So without a shepherd, the sheep without a shepherd in the Palestinian context would know no protection and wouldn't be guided to the sources of food and water and security. There would be no hope of survival. And the sheep would become very familiar with the voice or the call or the whistle of the shepherd and would follow that call or that voice only. And really, there's a powerful picture there of how Jesus wants us to see the nature of faith and our relationship with Him and also the understanding of the world in which we live. And the desert of Jesus' time is a great picture for the world in which we live, because in the world in which we live, there are glimpses of real beauty and provision and abundance and warmth and life, many things that we celebrate, many things that we enjoy, many things that are good.

But it's also a desert. It's also a place of danger. It's also a place of poverty and of drought and barrenness and isolation and darkness in many ways and evil and of course death. The world that we are in is more of a desert than a garden in many ways. And Jesus wants us to recognize and know that. He wants us to appreciate that life is not idyllic.

[7 : 25] You know, He's never said it, God's never said it, otherwise in the Bible, He always wants us to pick up that there's something wrong in this created world, something that wasn't there at the beginning. The good things are really good, but they're still in shadow.

They're awesome, but they're still in shadow. And the bad stuff is really bad. The bad stuff that we experience that we're going through just now. Sometimes the bad stuff in ourselves, the way we disappoint ourselves, the way we fail and make mistakes and hurt other people, there's bad stuff we recognize. And God always wants us to consider that and ask why. And He says it's because it's our sin that has estranged us from Him so that life for us is like that desert. It's paradoxical, but spiritually it's an abject desert for us. We taste God's good gifts and His goodness, but we often don't acknowledge or act on that. But it is also a place where we're exposed to deep danger and death and the result of sin against the author of life and rejecting Him and His Lordship and His worship of Him and His love is that we are estranged from Him. Because we've broken His laws. We've broken His laws that separate us from Him. And He's only given us two laws in this universe, ultimately, and they're laws of love. I think we often forget that. In Matthew chapter 22, Jesus speaks about that when He talks about the law of God. He says, teacher, someone asks him, which is the greatest commandment of the law? And He says to him, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. So everything is based on that, that law of God, which we fail and fall and stumble from.

Now, I've got a little sidebar here. I was watching the news. As we've all been watching the news, probably until we're kind of tired of hearing the same things and the folks saying the same things. But the weatherman came on last week on the BBC news, after the BBC news last week, and it was going to be a warmer weekend. And the weatherman said, you know, explaining the weather, and then he said, don't go out. Whatever you do, don't go out.

Don't break the rules. I thought that was an amazing statement. Can you imagine the weatherman saying that two months ago? You know, don't break the rules. Saying it with a degree of authority. We'd have been scoffed at completely. How quickly things have changed in this world and this society we find ourselves in, where the weatherman can tell us not to break the rules. And why would we even think of listening to what he was saying? Because death has come much closer in many ways. It's much more real. And people are much more willing to listen and at least consider obeying the rules that have been set down for them. Now, I wonder, is that what God's saying? You know, because there's danger and difficulty and darkness, as he's saying, just obey my rules. Just obey these two rules. It's love after all. Love me and love your neighbor. You know, that can't be too difficult. Just obey my rules. Is that what he says? Actually, that's not what the gospel is. And that's not what

[11 : 26] Christianity is. And that's not what God is saying. It's much, much worse than that. Because God is saying, you actually can't obey my rules. You can't put it right. You can't change your heart. You can't love me with all your heart so strength. And we don't love our neighbors as ourselves. We can't, by nature, live as laws of love. Sin in our heart is impossibly strong, both in our nature and in our nurture. It's just, we're just under the sentence of death because we can't put it right. We can't be put right with God. We can't live that out perfectly. And it leads to that isolation

and an eternal desert of separation in a place where love will not reign. And it's a place that Jesus called hell. You know, it's just almost unspeakable. Why should we listen then to what Jesus is saying? Why should we hear what He has to say? And that's what I want to think about for a minute or two. In verse 14 of this chapter, Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. We listen to what Jesus has to say here because He's good. I'm the good shepherd. Now, that word has lots of different connotations or expressions in the Greek, beautiful, handsome, excellent, eminent choice, surpassing, precious, useful, suitable, commendable, admirable. And lots of words to try and picture and grasp the goodness of God in a pure and perfect way, the goodness of Jesus way above even our best ideas of good because He's the source of good. He is the origin of good. He's the definer of good. And it's a good, a perfect good that will always there for reject evil and sin because that spoils and degrades and abuses and misinterprets and lies about goodness.

You know, we see that in shadow as parents. We seek to be good parents. We want to reject and protect our children from any kind of evil or any kind of badness. And we want to expose it in their own lives so that they can change from a human point of view in the society in which we live. And that begins to get us thinking about the goodness of God.

Now, we have a conceptual struggle with that, with His goodness because our concept of goodness is tainted by our own selfishness or by our own limitations, by our own standards, so that my goodness will be different from your goodness, for example. And each person will have really a different standard of goodness. And all of these standards will be different again from God's standards of goodness. And yet it's His standard and it's His perfect goodness that is the benchmark that matters ultimately. Another little example, a choice of car. As a layperson, I could go and look at a car and I could think, well, that's a great car. It's a nice colour. It's in good condition and it bashes on it. It's got a low mileage, interior is great. You can lift the engine, the engine looks fine. And you think that seems like a good car. It's a good price. Everything's good about it. But if the designer came along, the designer of that car came along, you opened the bonnet and he could see with his perfect eye as the designer at fatal flaw. And you say, look, if you drive that off the forecourt, you're going to kill someone with that car because there's a fatal flaw there. And it's a very expensive flaw to fix. It's worth more than the car. It's worth to fix it. It's a huge problem. And I say to my God saying that to us, He's our designer. We're made for Him. And to reject Him and to reject His standard of goodness is to reject who He is Himself. And to reject Him is the deepest sin of all because we're rejecting life and we're rejecting our Creator and we're rejecting His ultimate goodness.

Now, as I know that we struggle with that. As believers sometimes we struggle with that. We make excuses for our own goodness or for our own mistakes and we defend our own goodness.

And we often change the standard back to ourselves and we accuse God. But it doesn't change our guilt before Him that we fall short of His standard of goodness and that we need to be rescued from the death that accompanies that. We need to find the goodness that He has.

[16:48] We need to find the goodness on His terms. And that's where the gospel speaks to us. So He's good but what gives weight to His claims for goodness? You know, why, you might be asking, why would I listen to such a grim diagnosis? Doesn't it seem extreme? Isn't it too much to keep talking about death and all that goes with it? And the desperate reality of our condition without God? Of course, it is a grim diagnosis but why do we listen to His claims? And He gives us two reasons. And He says it here in this chapter in verse 15.

He says, I lay down my life for the sheep. In verse 18 He says again, no one takes it from me but I lay it down in my own accord. He lays down His life. That is the core message of the gospel. It's the core message of Jesus. He does it willingly, absolutely and completely, willingly laying down His life. Now some might argue, well, that's not a great deal. People who take their own lives are doing the same. Why is Jesus any different from that? He's just allowing His own life to be taken for whatever reason. But the difference is those who take their own life as human beings are doing so. They're victims of circumstances that in deep despair or a great sense of hopelessness and there's nothing worth staying alive for and they are stepping into some kind of unknown. But our great shepherd, Jesus Christ, is not a victim here. It's not despair that leads him to the cross. It's not a mistake. It is absolutely clear and divine planning by God. You know, Peter in his sermon, great sermon in the day of Pentecost says, but this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. So God was, and right

through the Bible we see this plan and purpose coming forward, that God is seeing the death of Jesus as the place where the price for our sins is being paid for and our law breaking, breaking the laws of love has been dealt with. The ugliness and the failure that we often see in ourselves by our own standards is being paid for, the price is being paid for by Jesus in great love. He's the substitute willingly bearing the cost of our estrangement from him from sin. He take our sentence of death. It's the best, most selfless loving act ever seen and it's this great fusion of divine love in verse 17. This reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life and I may take it up again. It's the highest expression of the internal love within God and the infinitely costly expression of it is that this is God's act of love for us. You and I, we need that love. We are searching for that kind of love, for that kind of acceptance. Searching to find someone who sees us as being of such great worth that they would die for us and not just anybody but God coming to do that for us. The cross is the path that he chose.

He laid down his life willingly and he laid down his life with authority. In verse 18 he says, no one takes it from me. I lay it down on my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it up again. These are strong words. He has authority over life and over death. Complete control. You see the careful language he says? I lay down my life. It's not taken from him. He is something that he is allowed to happen.

He's not stepping out into the unknown. There's no uncertainty. These are strong, powerful words and they are true because Jesus claims himself to be the truth. And I ask, and we almost ask the question, who with authority are we listening to? On whose authority are you make decisions about life and about existence and about the future and about life and death?

You need, we all need to make that decision. We need to decide, you need to decide and I need to decide, well I have decided the authority with which Jesus speaks is worth listening to. So he says he lays down his life. That gives great weight to his claims. But also he says he takes it up again. He takes his life up. Remember, he's speaking this to his disciples before the events of Passion Week. He knows exactly what he's walking into and he says, I lay down my life but I'm taking it up again. Jesus isn't a martyr for any cause. Nor is it the last act of bravery on behalf of somebody else. You know, there's been many people who have laid down their lives as it were to substitute for someone else, to die in someone's place as a last stand. And it's noble and it's amazing and it's awe-inspiring. But even that is a temporary reprieve and it's tainted always, isn't it, by that deep enduring sense of who has died and who has been lost in the cost of setting someone else free. But Jesus' death on the cross wasn't the last ditch heroism. However noble that would have been because he's saying I'm going to take my life up again. These are astounding six words that he says there that I may take it up again.

[23 : 21] The resurrection of Jesus therefore is no afterthought of God, nor is it a reformulation of the story of Jesus by the disciples later on because they wanted to believe in someone and they loved the thought of Him being resurrected. It speaks, the resurrection speaks of His authority, His power, His success, the eternal life that is within Him and the fact that He has defeated death and defeated its power. A kind of poor illustration but going back to that designer, it's like he says the engine there is knackered, it's no use. If you go out in it you'll kill yourself and others but I'm going to pay for a new one, a top of the range one that will just be wonderful car will go like a dream and I'll pay the price for that. It's infinitely more than that isn't it? But he can say that, he can do that because life is, he can give us new life because he has defeated the curse of death and the power of death and paid the price for our sins that brings into condemnation of death so that we might live. So the resurrection of Jesus is the single greatest fact of Christianity.

We don't have anything. Jesus defeating death is not a metaphor, it's not a picture, it's a fact and he explained to his disciples before the events happened that that is exactly what was going to happen. It's the key to salvation so that everyone who puts their trust in Jesus will know the Lordship of God and this great shepherd and eternal life. Know that in heaven with him and on into resurrection life body and soul reunited after the day of judgment and that's why I live for Christ because Christ died for me. He rose again and he guarantees eternal life. That is what I believe in, that's what I trust, that is what has transformed my life that his life has been gifted to me and spiritually I'm alive and spiritually I have a relationship with the Father and it is all his gift and it is all his grace.

I have done nothing whatsoever to deserve any of it and that's true of every Christian who worships in St. Columba's. This Easter, we've seen it is in many ways for us a unique Easter. Our lives have

all been changed dramatically. The fact that we're doing this online is an evidence of that but there's a million much more serious ways in which life has been affected dramatically but we also believe that this is God's universe and what he says in the Bible we actually believe that deep down it's something that every heart recognizes but suppresses and know today that he wants you to be reconciled to him, forgiven by him, accepted because Jesus lived the life we couldn't live and died the death we deserve. He wants to give us belonging, he wants to embrace us and give us that new heart, that new life and that future hope even beyond these uncertain and possibly recession fueling days of family separations and difficulties and trials and tribulations, beyond all of these things. It's not saying these things don't matter but reminding us that beyond these things when we trust in Jesus Christ, he will give us life and he will enable us to live and live eternally. Whatever happens in this life because we will all die but the sting of death has been removed and we will live for him eternally. I would love to speak to you more about that if you're not a Christian, if you've just tuned in for the first time.

I would love to, I love you to make contact with us and I love you to meet our people. This congregation of believers were imperfect. We fail and fall and stumble, we need forgiveness but we all have something very great and common and I think in these days it's been, what's of first importance has really hit home to us all, that we need to love Jesus and love one another and there's lots of other things that really are not that important and I hope that that will continue into when we meet together and I really long for that day again to have the kids running around here and to the place be full of people worshiping the living God and the great hope of the gospel and may it be a hope that, I would love it if this is the day that you find that hope and put your trust in Jesus for the first time and pray for forgiveness and for hope and for a new life. Amen. Let's pray. [28 : 43] Father God help us to understand your great gospel. Maybe Christians are listening in today and thinking, well I've heard it all before but maybe by your power and by your Holy Spirit be refreshed, to be reminded of it on Easter Sunday, to find it exciting and thrilling and the priority of our lives because of your grace, because of your gift, because it's not up to us that we don't have to reach up to you but you've come down into our suffering and you've suffered in our place, you understand our suffering, you're aware of what we are going through and you promise to take us through it, you promise to be with us in it and you promise to redeem us and indeed one day to redeem this whole universe in ways that are beyond our understanding and imagination. Bless us then we pray and we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.