

The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 3, 2009  
Psalm 23; John 10:11-18  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

### ***LAY OR LIE?***

To lay or lie, that is the question. One blogger made the point that people have been getting the two confused since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Score yourself on these:

Lay that book on the counter.

Let the sleeping dog lie.

The victim lay in the street.

It would help if you would lay down for a couple minutes.

Last night I laid awake in bed.

Mexico lays to the south of the United States.

How did you do? The first three were right, the second three wrong. Quick and easy: Use “lay” to mean put down. It usually takes an indirect object. Lie means recline or occupy a location. What’s tricky is that “lay” is the past tense of “lie.” I can just imagine several of my friends rolling their eyes as I have (over the years) misplaced a lay or a lie.

Where are we going with this? Today’s readings have one “lie” and seven “lays.”

The “lie” is in the most famous passage from the scriptures, Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures.”

The image of shepherds and sheep run through our scriptures. The thing preachers most talk about today is how dumb sheep are. Yet in that time sheep represented an important economic reality. They were the primary life source for the people, a sign of God’s providence. In the Passover meal the lamb symbolized new life. The lamb was associated with the passing away not only of winter, but of the angel of death, and the reality of slavery.

Psalm 23 is deeply loved because of its pastoral images. Lying down in green pastures and walking beside still waters. It is the number one psalm for funerals, but with an individualistic spin. When we pass through death’s dark valley, Jesus the shepherd holds us in his arms.

Yet in the early church Psalm 23 was connected to adult baptism and the community. The green pastures were the many weeks or years of learning about the faith. The still waters were the waters of the font. The path of righteousness was the new life before the newly baptized. The head anointed with oil was the cross of oil made on the forehead. The table and overflowing cup referred to the eucharist.

Much music has been inspired by Psalm 23 and Jesus the good shepherd. We’re singing a good deal of it today. You can almost feel that you are lying down in green pastures. But some of it is over-laid with a sentimentalism far removed from the scriptural images of shepherd and sheep. For example, some Romantic paintings of Christ the shepherd have him wearing a white shawl-like cloak and walking barefoot down a cobblestone path. As one writer put it: had Jesus been a meek and mild babysitter, he would not have been executed.

A good time to transition to the “lays” in our readings today. Five times in the gospel Jesus talks about laying down his life. He lays down his life for the sheep. He lays down his life willingly in order that he may take it up again. No sentimentalism here. Jesus puts himself at risk, places himself in the midst of danger, gives his very life, for the sake of his followers.

Back to “Sheep in the Bible 101.” At the end of the day the shepherds would bring their sheep to the fold to keep them safe from the dangers of the night—particularly scary wolves and thieves. One shepherd was designated to lie down in front of the sheep gate. He was literally the protector of the flock, with his very life if need be.

Our second reading takes all this “lay” talk a step further. This is how we know love—that Jesus laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Karen Michels is an independent radio producer. After 9/11 she started going around and interviewing people, asking them these three questions: *What do you live for? What would you die for? What would you kill for?* Those questions reveal our deepest values. How would you answer them? What do you live for? What would you die for? What would you kill for? We use these phrases all the time. I live for the weekend. I would die for a Coke. I would kill for a juicy hamburger.

Michels got very different answers when she asked the question in Manhattan or the Bible-belt of North Carolina. Sometimes people gave the same answer for all three questions. They live and would die and kill for their children ... or their faith .... or freedom .... or peace of mind.

You've heard the popular phrase "what would Jesus do?" How would Jesus answer these three questions? What do you live for? We could quote Jesus' words one verse before today's gospel: "I have come that they may have life abundantly." Yet Jesus brings that life not just for me, but for all. Especially those last and least.

What would you kill for? We won't even ask that question. The Jesus of the scriptures say: Love your enemies. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one.

So, Jesus, what would you die for? That's clear from today's gospel. I lay down my life for the sheep.

There is a lot of anxiety these days. Life is filled with risk and danger. Maybe not wolves and thieves. But swine flu and an unstable economy. And all the stress that seems to lie at the center of our daily lives.

Even as we celebrate the resurrection we remember that we are baptized into the death of the one who lays down his life for us. Who knows whether we could lay down our lives, whether we could die for family or faith or country or those in need. But what is clear is this: the path to new life and resurrection is always through death. Through letting go. Through laying down our burdens, our fears, our losses, that we may take them up again, and live an abundant life.

Come to think of it, that is the good news of this day. Even amid death. Even amid anxiety. Even amid uncertainty we lie down. We lie down in green pastures. Maybe we live for those green pastures--the earth and all its wonderful gifts.