

EASTER FOUR, YEAR A, APRIL 26, 2026

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday where we are given that familiar, comforting image of Jesus as shepherd. But if we are honest, these ten verses in the Gospel of John 10 is crowded with images that refuse to sit still. John gives us sheep, a sheepfold, a shepherd, a gate, a gatekeeper, a pasture, a sneaky band of thieves and bandits, and an even more sinister group of smooth-tongued “strangers.” At one point, the Gospel writer comes right out and says, “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying.” No kidding!

It’s tempting to treat this section of Scripture as if it’s written in some obscure code. As if our job is to crack its many secrets. What exactly does the sheepfold represent? Heaven? The Church? Our hearts? Who are the thieves and bandits? Are they different from the “strangers” with the creepy voices? What about the gatekeeper? Is the gatekeeper God? The Holy Spirit? Jesus himself? No, wait, how can Jesus be the gatekeeper if he’s the gate? Doesn’t he say he’s the gate twice? Actually, how can he be the gatekeeper or the gate, if he’s the shepherd? Confused?

I don’t think this passage of Scripture is meant to stump us. I think it is a reality to confront about the many images Jesus represents. Because when Jesus speaks, he is not offering spiritual poetry to admire. He is exposing the systems we trust and calling them into question with these images. So, let’s stop trying to decode every symbol and instead hear the claim that cuts through all of them. This morning, I want to hone in on “I am the gate.” Not a gate. *The* gate.

We think of gates as barriers. We think of bars and locks and alarms and enclosures. We imagine toddler gates or puppy training gates. Prison gates and “gated communities.” Those gates are something that keeps people out more than who it lets in. Too often gates define who belongs and who does not showing that gates are about control.

Let’s face it we live in a world and, even the Church, that is obsessed with building gates. We build them out of doctrine and call it truth. We build them out of fear and call it safety. We build them out of exclusion and call it holiness. We decide who is in and who is out. Who belongs and who does not. Who is worthy and who needs to prove themselves. And then we stand there, guarding what we have built, as if God had asked us to that. But Jesus interrupts all of it. “I am the gate.” Which means: *we are not*. And that is not a gentle correction. That is confrontation.

Because if Jesus is the gate, then every gate we have built that shuts people out in his name is a lie. Every boundary that protects our comfort but crushes another person’s dignity is a lie. Every voice that says, “You don’t belong here,” when Jesus has not said it is a lie. And we need to feel the weight of that. Because we have not just misunderstood the image. We have replaced it. We have taken a wide, open place of the gate Jesus says he is and turned it into a narrow checkpoint of approval.

But when Jesus says, “I am the gate,” he is not standing in front of a locked door. He is literally lying in the dirt. In the ancient sheepfold there was no gate. There was just an opening. And the shepherd would stretch his own body across it. He becomes the gate. Not to control access but to absorb danger. Not to keep people out but to hold the space open. “I place myself where the threat is,” Jesus says. “I become the threshold.” “If anything is going to harm you, it comes through me first.”

Do you hear how different that is from the way we use religion and how our secular world operates? We use gates to avoid risk by keeping others out. Jesus uses himself to enter it. We use gates to draw lines. Jesus uses himself to erase them. We use it to secure our place. Jesus gives up his. "I am the gate."

And if that is true, then the gate is not a place of restriction it is the place where fear loses its authority. Because listen again to what he says: "Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." In and out. It is a gate that swings open both ways. That's important to remember. It is not a gate that closes to keep others out rather it is a gate that opens. That is not containment. That is freedom. That is a life not managed by anxiety, or policed by shame, or reduced to rule-keeping. That is a life that breathes.

But the truth is many of us do not recognize what that kind of freedom means. It does mean we lose control of the gates we have put up which can be unsettling. Why? Well, if the gate swings open, we're not the ones who decide who walks through it. If the gate leads out, we cannot stay where it is comfortable. If the gate is Jesus, then we cannot replace him with our systems and still call it faith. But we still resist it.

We shrink the Gospel into something manageable. We turn grace into policy. We turn belonging into qualification. And all the while, Jesus is still there refusing to do that. Rather he is still opening a way out toward the people we have labeled. Out toward the places we avoid. Out toward a life that will cost us more than we planned to give. Because the gate does not just protect. It sends. Jesus does not say, "Come in and stay safe." He says, "Come in and go out."

Jesus as the gate says to us: Come into belonging. Go out into love. Come into grace. Go out into risk. Come into life. Go out and give it away. And the tragedy is this: the Church and too often secular society continually tries to nail the gate shut.

We try to keep people in line instead of setting them free. We try to preserve what we have instead of following where Jesus is going. But you cannot follow a shepherd who is also the gate if you refuse to move. Because Jesus is always opening, always leading and always calling us beyond the fences we have built.

"I am the gate," he says. The place where your fear is not in charge anymore. The place where your identity is no longer up for negotiation. The place where your life opens wide, uncontained, and free. But do not mistake this freedom for ease. Because if you walk through this gate, you will be changed. You will find yourself standing where he stands at the threshold. Not guarding. But opening. Not excluding. But welcoming. Not protecting your comfort. But placing yourself where love is needed most. Because that is what it means to follow the one who is the gate. And the gate is not closed. It has never been closed. The only question is whether we will stop building our own gates and finally walk through Jesus'. Amen.