My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Eastertide Resurrection Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Todays scripture offers us yet another lesson about sheep. And given that most of us don’t live on farms any more and really haven’t encountered sheep on a regular basis, let’s review a few interesting facts about sheep.

First, sheep have a strong flocking instinct. They feel safer when gathered together. Sheep need other sheep to feel safe. Separating one sheep out from the rest of the flock is disturbing and frightening to them.

Second, sheep will stay in maternal groups for life, grazing and sleeping together in the field. They know each other.

Third, sheep will follow a leader. If you can get one sheep moving, then the rest most likely follow. Leaders tend to be the most dominant sheep in the flock. Sheep will also follow someone they trust and know.

Fourth, sheep are hesitant to move towards the dark or into an enclosed area. To move them into the barn at night, turn on the barn light so they can easily follow.

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me”, Jesus says in our scripture. Now, let’s think about Congregational communities of faith and how they might be just a little like sheep.

We want to be together. We want to be with our hometown crowd. We want a leader that we can trust and know whom we can follow. And the world hands us enough darkness, we want to be led into the light, where we can see God and God’s handiwork and add our own contribution to the Kingdom of God.

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me”, Jesus says in our scripture. Humans change all the time through culture, national origin, and politics. But sheep haven’t changed in 2,000 years. Now do we see why Jesus might keep referring to his people as sheep? Sheep have no ego, economic power, hair color, fashion, hostility, social status, property rights, or anything else that puts them one above another. Right?

OK. So that’s important to know that we are sheep and we know Jesus’ voice as the Good Shepherd. The lesson here is that there are instincts that will always keep us close to our shepherd, and as sheep we don’t need to be told to do this. We just do it by instinct. And Jesus teaches that God’s sheep acknowledge their shepherd by how they live. Let’s hear that scripture again: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me”. Listen, know, and believe. Sounds a lot like what we’re told in the first verses of the Gospels by John the Baptist, right? Listen, repent (or know anew by turning around), and believe.

So we live INTO being sheep, don’t we? We are not born by understanding all about God’s purposes. But neither was Jesus. Remember when he went to the Temple as a boy, he had grown in Wisdom and Stature. So, too, do we have to grow as God’s sheep as we live. But because the entry stakes are not easy—because we are made to have a journey with many trails and trials—we are on a path that develops an intimacy with God and God’s purposes that we can differentiate when something else comes along looking like God, but ain’t.

When we live into being sheep, and we have these fits and starts of getting distracted by the not-God stuff through our lives, we start to know our leaders’ voice in our hearts. And that ability to know is the intimacy that Jesus talks about when he talks about union with God, (whom he calls his Father) and when he says, “I and the Father are One”. And so, no one else can fake that intimacy that Jesus has with us. So we know counterfeit shepherds that lead us from God’s purposes, don’t we?

And it’s why we can respond to the authentic call so easily and readily. And it’s why Tabitha responds when she hears Peter call her name, an act that raises her to life. Have we heard this in the last few weeks, someone called by name by God and raised to new life? Hmm? Mary in the Garden perhaps? Peter is invoking the call of the Good shepherd to metaphorically raise Tabitha. It’s evidence of eternal life promised by Jesus, the Shepherd, isn’t it? “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand”.

How many of us can say that we can clearly hear our names through the din of our life and its noise of our social circles, our symbols of culture and status, and our pre-dispositions to believe a whole lot of stuff we read or hear from others?

Only when Peter calls Tabitha by name, does she awaken. She doesn’t awaken when folks gather around her. But Tabitha the sheep hears the call of the shepherd—the one who she knows, who calls her by name—then she responds. But not until that point.

Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

Our names are only uttered when we are ready to listen, believe, and follow. When our lives are at the point where change is not only needed, but compelled. And let’s be clear: Peter is uttering the words, but God is calling her by name. The old Tabitha is dead. After she is called by name, she is so very alive to all who are near in a new, clear, and compelling way that was not accessible to her before.

And yet this doesn’t guarantee our protection from predators, does it? While we know we are in but not of the world by being God’s sheep, bad stuff still happens to us. Psalm 23 lets us know of the valley of the shadow, and the presence of our enemies, even while we’re under our Shepherd’s care. Right living doesn’t always mean we’ll be safe forever more.

But what will change us to make us ready to hear our names called? Will danger of the world change us? Or will that make us more anxious, jaded, or hopeless? What will make us one of God’s steadfast sheep, holding fast to being vulnerable and helpless, even as we know that there are no guarantees?

What are, my friends, God’s real promises? Let’s ask one another and ourselves this week, and for that, thanks be to God on this Mother’s Day, Amen.