

05/11/14 4 Easter A

-- Last November, when I was on retreat in Wales, I had a lot of time to walk the back roads in the hills of that area. There were a lot of sheep, and the fences and boundaries weren't always distinct between one property and another.

-- So most sheep had a colored "brand" on their backs, to show who their owner was. That way the shepherd could get them back to their pens at the end of the grazing day.

-- In first century Israel, sheep weren't color-branded. They were trained to recognize the voice of their master. He would call them out of the pen in the morning, and back there in the evening.

-- Each pen was a circular wall, just high enough to be about the height of the sheep. There was an opening in one part of that wall where the sheep would come in and out. At night, the shepherd would literally put his body across the opening to sleep. He would keep out intruders of any human or animal species, guarding the opening with his body.

-- When Jesus calls himself the gate, that's what he's talking about. The people of his day would understand this. Jesus protects his people. He allows them to seek life-giving waters while shielding them from evil.

-- Jesus literally put his bodily life on the line for us. That's what Peter is speaking about when he addresses newly-baptized Christians in our second reading. Many of them were of the lower class; some were slaves.

-- He tells them to be patient in their suffering. He isn't asking them to be doormats, or to ignore real injustice. He's challenging them to follow the example of Christ. He put up with unjust treatment, and yet he did not lose his dignity or become a doormat for others.

-- Nearly every day, people go out and put their lives on the line to protect others, to keep us from harm. We might think about those out

west who are fighting the brush fires in very dry conditions. Or firefighters in Northwest Ohio who have lost their lives recently.

-- In less dramatic but very real ways, mothers put themselves on the line every day for their children. They imitate Jesus, the shepherd who is also the gate which keeps danger out and the way to true happiness open. That's something to keep in mind as we celebrate Mother's Day.

-- Jesus has put himself out on the line for us. He gave his life for us. And he continues to give us life through the power of the Holy Spirit present in the Church and in the world today.

-- Why did he do that? Why does he continue to do that? The last words of the gospel say it all: *I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*

-- Yes, Jesus didn't just come to rescue us from the power of sin. He came to give us **abundant** life—not mere existence, or a reasonable sense of peace, but life which overflows. He wants us to reach the fullness of our spiritual potential.

-- May we be more aware of the life Jesus offers as we appreciate all those who give of themselves in order to help others have a better life. May we be aware of how Christ works through us, as we exercise self-sacrificing love.

-- As we do this more and more, people will see how we live out the life Jesus has given us—not mere existence or survival, but **abundant** life.