

THE LORD GUARANTEES**PSALM 23:6**

Anyone here today who's planning on getting married this year? Oliver's Travels, a London-based luxury travel company, is offering to guarantee that rain will not ruin your wedding day. Is this really possible? According to their website it is. The company says it can now offer their customers a service that can 100% guarantee fair weather and clear skies for your wedding day! It's currently available to customers organizing a destination wedding in France. The company employs the talents of pilots and meteorologists and takes over three weeks to plan. It uses silver iodide to "seed" the clouds—essentially giving the water vapor something to condense around to prevent rain. The cost? It starts at \$150,000. The company boasts "success can be guaranteed." However, they also admit, "If a natural disaster such as a hurricane were to occur this cannot be controlled." OK.... On this Easter Sunday, I want you to think with me about a very special guarantee. In fact, it's the greatest guarantee ever offered anyone anywhere at any time. Both the symbol of that guarantee and the reality of what it guarantees is all wrapped up in the empty tomb of a man named Jesus who walked this earth some 2,000 years ago.

We've been reflecting on perhaps the most well-known passage in all of the Bible – Psalm 23 – verse by verse. It was written by a man named David who lived about 1,000 years before Jesus. David was the greatest king of Israel, but – more importantly – God said David was a man after his own heart. When David was a boy, he took care of his father's sheep. David was likely an expert on sheep and shepherds. The more David got to know God, the more he realized God was like a faithful shepherd who takes loving care of the people, the sheep, who belong to Him. Now, you may wonder what Psalm 23 has to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was Jesus Himself who forever linked sheep, shepherds, and what He accomplished 2,000 years ago this past week on Good Friday and Easter Day. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (Jo. 10:11 NLT)

Each week we've been reading out loud and together Psalm 23 in a different English version. Today, please join me in reading it from the New English Translation. It's the last verse – verse 6 - of Psalm 23 we want to reflect on today. It says, "Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life." (NET) Because David lived 1,000 years before Jesus, he didn't know anything about Jesus. David didn't know anything about a cross or an empty tomb. He said what he said about God from his own personal experience. What's amazing to me is to realize that everything David said about God was confirmed and guaranteed 1,000 years later by, in, and through the resurrection of Jesus! Let me explain what I mean by sharing with you today what the empty tomb of Jesus guarantees. First of all, the empty tomb guarantees...

MY SHEPHERD CERTAINLY LOVES ME.

How did David put it? "Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life." (NET) Isn't that a great

word – “surely”? Not maybe Jesus loves you, not possibly Jesus loves you, not I hope Jesus loves you, not I have a hunch Jesus might just kind of love you. Surely. Certainly. Absolutely. Without a doubt. Beyond any doubt. Definitely. Conclusively. How could David know that about God? Well, most Bible scholars believe David wrote Psalm 23 toward the end of his life. He looked back over all the years – the ups and downs, the triumphs and tragedies, the successes and failures – and saw how well God had taken care of him. God had been there and taken him through everything. His past experiences had given him a first-hand perspective into God’s nature and character, so he was able to say with confidence, “Lord, you’ve been like a good, faithful shepherd to me. Because of how you’ve treated me in the past, I believe you’re going to take good care of me for the rest of my life.”

Now David was on the “not knowing about it” side of Easter. We are on the “knowing all about it” side of Easter. Meaning what? We have even more reason to know and believe that Jesus, the good shepherd, certainly loves us. The Bible makes it clear that if Jesus loved you enough to die on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and then was raised from the dead to “seal the deal,” you should never question whether your Shepherd loves you. The Bible says, “We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us.” (1 Jo. 3:16 NLT) How do you know God certainly loves you today and tomorrow? The tomb is empty! The empty tomb is an eternal reminder that we have a sure God, a certain God, a faithful God, and an absolutely dependable God. He never starts something He doesn’t finish. He can never forsake us even though we can forsake Him. He can never fail us even though we can – and do – fail Him.

How do you discover God’s love is certain and sure? Same as David. Personal experience. Yes, the empty tomb provides the certain, sure foundation, but then to that foundation you add your own experience of God day by day over the years. He healed your broken heart. He forgave you of sins that you couldn’t forgive yourself of. He rescued you in the midst of financial collapse. He brought healing to your body. He saved your marriage. Or, he healed your spirit after your marriage didn’t survive. He delivered you from alcohol or drug addiction. He brought your child and you through that nightmare – you fill in the blank as to the specifics. He got you through the death of the person you loved most. He gave you a purpose you never had before.

What is a Christian after all? Is it a person who goes to church regularly? A person who can quote Bible verses? A person who lives a better life than most other people do? A person who believes certain things about Jesus and God? The best definition of a follower of Jesus is simply someone who has a personal relationship with Jesus and who now wants to follow and obey Jesus every day. Jesus said, “The sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd. He calls his own sheep by name and he leads them out. When the shepherd walks ahead of them, they follow him because they know his voice.... I am the Good Shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me.” (John 10:3-4, 14 NLT) Are you a Christian today? It depends on whether you have a personal experience with Jesus, the good Shepherd. And it depends on whether you sincerely seek to follow and obey Him in your everyday life. The empty tomb guarantees something else. It proves beyond any doubt that...

MY SHEPHERD SACRIFICIALLY LOVES ME.

How did David put it? “Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD’s house for the rest of my life.” (NET) The word for “good” in that verse means whatever is pleasant, beautiful, and agreeable in life. Many people are convinced God is not very interested in them. Or, worse yet, they see God as eager to punish them for their sins. Not true. God’s first and foremost attitude toward human beings is to shower us with His goodness and faithfulness. The Bible says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!” (Ps 34:8) The word for “faithfulness” in that same verse is a very rich word. It’s the word for God’s kind of love. It can be translated in a variety of ways. It means God is full of faithfulness, full of integrity, full of mercy, and full of loving kindness at all times and in all ways toward us. God isn’t out to get you. God isn’t out to make your life miserable, or difficult, or painful. Instead the Bible says, “How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings.” (Ps 36:7 NLT)

Remember, throughout this psalm, David has sheep and shepherds in mind. So, here, it’s like the Lord has two assistant shepherds, one named Mr. Goodness, and the other named Ms. Faithfulness who help Him take care of you and me! These two gracious assistants – Mr. Goodness and Ms. Faithfulness – walk closely at your heels day and night. They’re not there to spy on you or send bad reports about you to the Shepherd. They’re there to protect you, bless you, guide you, and help carry out the will and wishes of Jesus, the good Shepherd, toward you. Suppose David had said instead, “justice and righteousness will follow you all the days of your life.” Would you really want Mr. Justice or Ms. Righteousness to be following you around all day every day? Not me, thanks very much! Mr. Goodness and Ms. Faithfulness are there to give you and me all that God wants us to enjoy in this life and the next.

Again, David was on the “not knowing about it” side of Easter. We are on the “knowing all about it” side of Easter. Meaning what? We have even more reason to know and believe that Jesus, the good shepherd, sacrificially loves us. The Bible says, “We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us.... Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.” (1 Jo. 3:16; 1 Pt. 3:18 NLT) How do you know God loves you today and tomorrow sacrificially? The tomb is empty! The cross and the empty tomb is an eternal reminder of the extent God was willing to go to bring you into an eternal relationship with Him.

One winter’s night in 1935, Fiorello LaGuardia, the irrepressible mayor of New York, showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night a tattered woman, charged with stealing a loaf of bread, was brought before him. She defended herself by saying, “My daughter’s husband has deserted her. She’s very sick, and her children are starving.” The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, saying, “It’s a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she’s got to be punished to teach other people a lesson.” Mayor LaGuardia

sighed. He turned to the old woman and said, "I've got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." However, even while pronouncing sentence, LaGuardia reached into his pocket, took out a \$10 bill, and threw it into his hat with these famous words: "Here's the \$10 fine, which I now pay, and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The following day, a New York newspaper reported: "\$47 and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Making forced donations were a red-faced storekeeper, seventy petty criminals, and a few New York policemen." Sometimes we get what we don't deserve. That old grandmother, by the letter of the law, deserved punishment. But she didn't get it. She deserved justice, but she got mercy. The God of the Universe paid your debt of sin Himself on the cross and then He raised Jesus from the dead in triumph. You can't ever deserve His sacrificial love. You can't ever earn it. All you can ever do is take it or receive it for the gift that it is. And in response you can begin to love, follow, and obey Jesus, the good Shepherd, today and forever.

Someone here today might be thinking, "This all sounds a little too good to be true. Life isn't always good." True enough. It's easy to get all misty-eyed reading Psalm 23 when things are going well in your life. But how about when we face serious health issues, or the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the destructive rebellion of one of our children, or when we're betrayed by a family member or a close friend? Well, David was likely an old man when he wrote Psalm 23. By then, he'd been through much tragedy and disappointment in his life. If anyone had reason to question whether Mr. Goodness and Ms. Faithfulness were really following him all the days of his life it was David. I think a verse over in the New Testament helps us understand what David meant by goodness and faithfulness. It says, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom. 8:28 NLT) Nobody is saying a cancer diagnosis is good. Nobody is saying death is good. Nobody is saying divorce is good. Biblical goodness doesn't mean you get everything you want when you want it – that's a child's definition of goodness – but instead it means God bringing us through all of life's events – the pleasant and the painful – and molds us into spiritual, godly maturity.

How many of you out there have ever made a cake? It takes a lot of different ingredients to make a cake. Some of the ingredients taste delicious all by themselves - sugar or chocolate, for example. Other ingredients don't. Butter, flour, or raw eggs all by themselves don't taste great. But in the hands of a good cook, all those ingredients blended together produce a wonderful, delicious cake. God has the power, and the grace, and the love to take the good and the bad, the pleasant and the painful, the triumphant and the tragic in your life and mine and somehow create a wonderful life. The empty tomb guarantees something else. Interestingly, it proves that...

MY SHEPHERD AGGRESSIVELY LOVES ME.

How did David put it? “Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD’s house for the rest of my life.” (NET) You might be more familiar with the wording “follow” in that verse instead of “pursue.” For example, another translation puts it like this, “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.” (NIV) The actual word is better translated there as “pursue” or “chase.” In the Old Testament the same word was often used in reference to pursuing, chasing, or hunting down your enemies in order to capture or kill them. It had a pretty determined, advancing, and invading meaning to it. Aggressive. The word “follow” is too soft and too passive to be a good translation of what David meant. Would you agree with me there’s a big difference between pursuing someone and following someone, or between chasing someone down and merely following him or her?

David is saying God’s goodness and faithfulness acts aggressively toward us. His love pursues us. His grace chases us. His mercy hunts us down until it finds us hiding in fear. Someone once put up a great sign—a lost dog sign. There was a big cash reward for whoever found the lost dog, and a description of the dog. It said: "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence (ouch!), he's almost deaf, and he answers by the name 'Lucky.'" Lucky? That dog isn't lucky! He's been through a whole lot of mess. But he's lucky because he's got an owner who aggressively loves him and wants him back. Without Jesus, your life and mine was, is, and will be a mess. But we have a good Shepherd who aggressively loves us and wants us to be with Him.

How does God pursue or chase us? Sometimes it’s through life’s tragedies and painful events. On other occasions He hunts us down through people He strategically puts into our lives to point us to Him. David was on the “not knowing about it” side of Easter. We are on the “knowing all about it” side of Easter. Meaning what? We have even more reason to know and believe that Jesus, the good shepherd, aggressively loves us. The Bible says, “When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.” (Rom. 5:6-8 NLT) How do you know God loves you today and tomorrow aggressively? The tomb is empty! The cross and the empty tomb is a reminder that God was after us even while we were yet sinners – far away from Him. His love, grace, and mercy pursued us, chased us, and hunted us down until we finally gave up and gave in. Is God pursuing you? Is He chasing you? Is He hunting you down? I hope so. Because there’s nothing more wonderful than to be aggressively loved. A final thought. The empty tomb guarantees...

MY SHEPHERD COMPREHENSIVELY LOVES ME.

How did David put it? “Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD’s house for the rest of my life.” (NET) When winter time came, both sheep and shepherds would come down from the hills where they’d spent the summer and fall months in order to find shelter in the barns and corrals of the

shepherd. Home looked pretty good especially because the shepherd was there. David said he was like a well-satisfied sheep content in his Shepherd's excellent care. At the end of his earthly life, David wanted to be and to stay as close to his Shepherd – the Lord - as possible. Wherever the Lord was present, that's where David wanted to be. Why? Because his Shepherd's care was so incredibly comprehensive. All my days. For the rest of my life. Not some days. Not even most days. Not just on some days. All the days of my life. God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. Isn't that right? David had been well taken care of by the Lord for all of his life and he suspected God had even eternity figured out for him as well. Because he'd seen God's faithfulness through the years, he had hope for the years to come.

It's hard to know if David was thinking about Heaven here. But he was thinking about home. David never ever wanted to step away from God's presence. Home, for David, was wherever the Lord – his Shepherd – was present. Wherever Heaven will be and whatever Heaven will be like, it will feel like your real home because Jesus, your Shepherd, will be there. Many hotels and motels want to offer you and me a place that feels "just like home." But we can tell the difference. If Jesus is your Shepherd, this old world can never truly feel like home. There's got to be a place better than this, am I right? Deep down inside we just know that our real home is with Jesus. Even the Bible says, "He has planted eternity in the human heart." (Ecc. 3:11 NLT) This old world is not your real home, so be careful not to act like it is! Hold out for your true home.

David was on the "not knowing about it" side of Easter. We are on the "knowing all about it" side of Easter. Meaning what? We have even more reason to know and believe that Jesus, the good shepherd, comprehensively loves us. The Bible says, "The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:14-16 NLT) Is there anything more comprehensive than eternal life – than the offer to live with Jesus not as some weekend house guest who stops by for a cup of coffee and a nice chat, but instead as someone who unpacks your suitcases and moves in as a permanent resident? How do you know God loves you today and tomorrow comprehensively? The tomb is empty! The empty tomb is a reminder you have a good Shepherd who has gone before you to prepare a place for you and He's waiting for you to join Him there. Didn't the good Shepherd say, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (Jo. 14:1-3 NLT) Didn't the good Shepherd also say, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this?" (Jo. 11:25-26 NLT)

Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church in California, and the author of "The Purpose Driven Life", and his wife, Kay, went through a devastating loss when their 27 year old son, Matthew, took his own life after battling depression and mental illness for years. About a year after this tragedy, Rick said, "I've often been asked, 'How have you

made it? How have you kept going in your pain?' And I've often replied, 'The answer is Easter.' "You see, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus happened over three days. Friday was the day of suffering, pain, and agony. Saturday was the day of doubt, confusion, and misery. But Easter—that Sunday—was the day of hope, joy and victory." He went on to say, "And here's the fact of life: you will face these three days over and over and over in your lifetime. And when you do, you'll find yourself asking—as I did—three fundamental questions. Number one, 'What do I do in my days of pain?' Two, 'How do I get through my days of doubt and confusion?' Three, 'How do I get to the days of joy and victory?' The answer is Easter. The answer ... is Easter."

"Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life." (NET) How do you know God certainly loves you? The tomb is empty! How do you know God loves you sacrificially? The tomb is empty! How do you know God loves you aggressively? The tomb is empty! How do you know God loves you comprehensively? The tomb is empty!