

Dear Christian Friends,

Once upon a time (a real time, mind you, not an imagined one), there was a wolf. He was a fat old thing. You see, he had it pretty easy. Whenever he wanted to eat, he only had to walk to the door of his cave and look at the sheep that fed right outside. He'd eye this one or that one. Then he'd go after it and, with a minimal struggle, bring it down and eat away to his heart's content. Only the more he ate, the bigger he got, and the bigger he got, the hungrier he became. Oh, he was a wicked old thing. Sometimes he'd just poke his head out the door and howl. All the sheep would begin to shiver at the very sound of him. He'd chuckle to himself, *Yes, you better be afraid, you silly sheep, because one of these days I'm going to be eating you, and it won't be pleasant. Oh, no it won't. Ha! Ha!*

This big bad wolf, you see, had a name—a name of fear. The sheep had only to think of his name and they'd get wobbly in their knees. Some would faint outright. His name was Death. And Death was always hungry and never satisfied—always eating sheep and always wanting more. Oh, and he stank. The very smell of him was worse than his name or his howl. He was altogether dreadful, let me tell you! But he was in charge, and all the sheep knew it.

Well, one day he was feeling hungrier than ever. He poked his head out of the cave door to howl, and he couldn't believe his eyes. Why, right there in front of his door, on his very doorstep almost, was the fattest, juiciest sheep he'd ever seen. The audacity of it!

He drew in the air to fill his vast lungs and then let out a stone-splitting howl. All the other sheep in the vicinity turned tail and ran. They were terrified—all but the sheep that still calmly grazed just outside his cave. That sheep paid him no heed at all. It kept on eating, as though it hadn't even heard him. Well, now he was getting downright angry. He came bounding out the door and went right up to that impertinent animal. Again he sucked the air into his

lungs, and this time he howled right in the sheep's face.

The sheep looked up and blinked as the hideous odor of decay was blasted in its face. Yet, totally unconcerned, the sheep blinked and then stared and then calmly went back to grazing. Now the wolf was getting himself into quite a tizzy. *Don't you know who I am?* He snarled. The sheep looked at him and oh so calmly – at peace even – the sheep said, *Yes, I know.*

The other sheep began to creep back, at a safe distance, to watch. They couldn't believe what they were witnessing. *Well, snarled the Wolf, aren't you afraid?* The sheep looked Death, that old wolf, right in the eyes and said, *Of you? You must be kidding!*

Now the wolf was so livid with anger that he spoke low and menacing: *You're in for it, lamb chops. And you're not going to have it easy, either. I'm going to take you out slowly and painfully.* There was a moment of silence and then the sheep said, *I know.* The other sheep had all been watching because they'd never before seen anything like this. But the moment the wolf pounced they turned away in a hurry. A great sadness filled them. They had thought—well, they had scarcely dared to hope, that maybe it was possible—that just this once the wolf wasn't going to get his way. But their hopes were dashed.

It was just as the wolf said: slow and painful, an awful and ugly sight. And in the end, there was nothing left. He turned his rude, crimson face to the other sheep, and he belched. They turned tail and ran, knowing he'd be back for them one day soon.

The wolf went back to his cave, he took out a toothpick and cleaned his teeth, thinking he'd never tasted a sheep that was quite so good. Nothing tough about that meat, no sir! It was tender and rich and altogether satisfying. The thought hit him with surprise. It was almost as though his insatiable hunger had actually been satisfied for once. The thought was a little disturbing. Well, no matter, he thought. And off he went to bed.



When the morning came the wolf wasn't feeling quite himself. It was almost as though he were getting a bit of a tummy-ache. Hmm, such a thing never happened. He always woke up ravenous and went off to start eating first thing in the morning—at least a dozen or so sheep even before the dew was off the grass. But not this morning.

His tummy *was* grumbling. By noon he was feeling more than discomfort. He was feeling positively ill. He who had brought such pain on those poor sheep was getting a taste of pain himself, and it was most unpleasant. He kept thinking back to that impertinent sheep he had eaten yesterday afternoon, the one that had tasted so strangely good. Could it have actually been rotten? Could it have been—he gasped at the thought—poisoned?

After a few days, he stopped thinking altogether. The pain was just too great. He rolled around on the floor of his den, and he howled and yammered. The sheep heard the sound and didn't quite know what to make of it all. They crept cautiously nearer and nearer to the door of his house and turned their heads to listen. What could it mean?

Sometime in the dark of the night the wolf let out a shuddering howl. Something was alive and moving inside his stomach. Something pushed and poked and prodded until with a sudden burst his belly opened. And something, rather, *someone* stepped out through the hole, right out of his massive stinking stomach. The wolf felt like he was dying. And I suppose, in a way, he was.

The figure that stepped out of the wolf's belly was totally unknown to the wolf. Why, it looked like a shepherd. He'd heard of such a critter, but had never actually met one. With a mixture of pain, curiosity and dread, the wolf watched as the shepherd, staff in hand, turned to face him. Then the shepherd began to laugh. He laughed and his laughter blew open the door of the wolf's house. He laughed and the sheep were filled with bewilderment, wondering what was going. He laughed as he looked the wolf right in the eye.

*So, you don't recognize me, old foe?  
It was I who you ate outside your house*

*three days ago. It was I that you promised would die horribly—and oh how you kept your promise! But what do you propose to do about me now? You?* the wolf gasped. The voice was the same; he recognized it. This shepherd, as impossible as it seemed, was indeed the sheep whom he had swallowed. *You?* The wolf gasped again. *But how? Oh, the pain!*

The shepherd smiled and said, *Well, I think you're pretty harmless now, my friend. Go on and try to eat some of my sheep. I promise you that as fast as you swallow them down, I will lead them right out through that hole I made in your stomach. And then you'll never be able to touch them again!*

The wolf howled in fear and anger and rage, but there was nothing he could do. The Shepherd had tricked him, fooled him good! The Shepherd then stepped outside the door and called the sheep together. They knew his voice too. They'd heard it before. They stood before the Lamb who had become the Shepherd and listened as he told them what would happen to them. He warned them, *You will die too. That wolf will come out in a few days and be hungrier than ever. He'll swallow you right down. But don't worry. I punched a hole right through his belly, and I promise, I'll bring you out again.*

Once upon a time, huh? How about two thousand years ago? And yet the promise still holds: ***I am the good shepherd [he says.] The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again...My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.***

It is this comfort of the resurrection through Christ that reaches us today. You have the same promise. Let the old wolf howl and snarl all he will. We know about the hole in his tummy. We know about the Sheep who is the Good Shepherd. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed Alleluia! **Amen.**