

Fifth Sunday after Easter

Acts 7:55-60 Ps. 31 1 Pet. 2:2-10 John 14:1-14

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church April 19, 2026

I will ask you to take a look at the photograph tucked into your bulletin this morning... which at first glance may just look like a pile of rocks... But as anyone who's spent any time hiking in national parks like Acadia or in State parks like Baxter may know, it's actually a "cairn," which is a pile of rocks strategically placed one on top of another by wilderness guides or park rangers to mark a path or a trail for hikers to follow... providing a "way" through wilderness areas that hikers can trust for direction and good guidance.

I have a pastor friend who once told me about a backpacking trip he went on in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with the youth group from his church. There were about 15 teenagers and two grown-ups, including himself, and when they started their ascent up one of the highest mountains in the range, it was a beautiful day.

But, as sometimes happens, after they had made it up to the summit and scattered out across the vast expanse of rock to see what they could see, they soon realized that a fog was quickly moving in... a fog so dense that before they knew it, they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces.

My pastor friend, a seasoned outdoorsman, knew they could easily get disoriented in that fog, making it difficult for them to find the

trail to begin their descent... So, seeing a cairn not far from where he stood, he used the sound of his voice to call all the kids to that spot. And when they were all assembled, he had them take hands, extend their arms, and fan out as far as they could...

And then he had them walk together in that line in a circular fashion, with the pastor staying put at the first cairn as they moved (the whole line of them) in a counter-clockwise movement... walking slowly until one of them came upon another cairn... and upon finding one, calling the whole group to that spot, and then repeating the sequence of taking hands, fanning out, walking in a circle until the next cairn was found...

That exercise, and those cairns, as my pastor friend told the story, providing him and those in his charge a “way” to finally find the path that would take them down the mountain.

I speak of cairns this morning as a “way” to move through times of fear and uncertainty, because when Jesus said in the 14th chapter of John’s Gospel that he was **“the way, the truth and the life, and the only way to the Father,”** he was, as most Biblical scholars agree, using the word “way” in that same sense... offering himself (like a cairn) to his disciples as a “way” to find their “way” into the fullness of life to which God called them, even as they were “fogged in” by fear and grief and despair...

Now unfortunately, this is not the way most of us hear this text from John, as evidenced in our vestry meeting last Tuesday morning, when, as we do at the beginning of each of our meetings, we read the Gospel text for the coming Sunday morning and then went around the

table giving everyone a chance to say what most struck them about the reading... Every single person in that group admitting their dislike for this text as it has so often been used by Christians over the centuries to “bludgeon people over the head,” as one of our vestry members put it...

That common interpretation of the text twisting Jesus’ words to say in essence, “Believing in me is the only **way** you can get to God, so you better shape up and start believing or you’re going to find yourself roasting in hell in the great there-after.”

An interpretation, as most Biblical scholars would say, that is as far from what John’s Jesus was trying to impart to his disciples as it could be... Which, as the scholars would suggest, was not an attempt to make believing in Jesus a litmus test for entrance into God’s presence or God’s good graces, **but rather a word of encouragement intended to give the disciples hope as they struggled to make sense of the terrifying words Jesus had just spoken to them on the evening prior to his arrest and trial...** words telling them that he was going to leave them soon, that they could not go with him, and that they would all deny or desert him in his imminent hour of need...

Never mind that Jesus also told them not to be afraid, that he was going to prepare a place for them, and would come again to take them to himself... Never mind that Jesus assured the disciples they knew the way...

Never mind all that... They were distraught... Here was the Messiah, the one they believed would deliver them and the whole world from all forces of oppression and fear; forces they knew all too well in the violent grip of the Roman Empire... Here was the one on whom they had pinned their hopes and their lives, telling them that he

was soon to be humiliated, mocked, scorned, crucified, and then... gone... absent from them...

No wonder Thomas cried out, speaking aloud what all of them must have been thinking, “Lord we do not know where you are going... How can we know the way?”

And Jesus responding with words intended to comfort, saying in essence,

-“You know the **Way** we’ve been traveling together... God’s **Way** of love, compassion, healing and peace...

- “You know the **Truth** we’ve been learning together... God’s **Truth** of justice, mercy, and dignity for all of God’s creation...

-“You know the **Life** we’ve been living together... God’s **Life** of sharing, relinquishment, and dying to self for the sake of prodigal generative joy...

“So just keep going in that same **way**. And be not afraid because I’ll be right there with you... Not in the same way you’ve grown accustomed to... but by the power of God’s spirit which abides in me, and which I will give to you...”

When Jesus said he was the way, the truth and the life, and that the only way to God was through him, his words were not a 1st century version of “My way or the highway” ... They were words of pastoral care, spoken to the terrified disciples, assuring them that they would be not alone as they continued to follow the **way** they had learned from Jesus...

Jesus promising them that by following that way, with God's Spirit to guide them, they would come to **know** the very heart of God and so have the courage and the *chutzpah* to **live** into the fullness of life to which God had called them, even when Jesus was no longer physically present with them... even when everything around them was falling apart...

(No wonder the first Christians were called "The people of the **way**"... Because it was clear from the way they cared for others, and included outsiders, and lived counter to the ways of the Empire that their faith wasn't so much about **believing something** as it was about **following someone**... following the Jesus "way"... one Jesus-step, one Jesus-cairn at a time... one Jesus-cairn of "living stones" at a time, as this morning's text from Hebrews puts it... "living stones" to follow into the fulness of life, into the heart of God... **The way and the destination being inseparable from one another**... just as the wise old saying affirms as it insists that "how we get there is where we'll arrive"...)

Jesus' words "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" are difficult words to understand. And we often make one of two mistakes when we try to interpret it... Either we reject it outright because of the way it's been used to ferret out "unbelievers"... Or we reduce it to something manageable, something tame, something that can be made into a set of rules to follow with a guaranteed safe ending at the end of the day for those who follow the rules well...

(This interpretation of the text and this understanding of the “way of Jesus” being what theologian Belden Lane has called “a saccharine, limp-wristed theology... a saccharine, limp-wristed theology...”)

Certainly not what Jesus was promising his disciples in the portion of his farewell address we heard this morning, as he promised them not safety, but his presence, his spirit, and by virtue of his oneness with God the Father, promising God’s Spirit as well, as the disciples would be left to continue following the way of Jesus in his absence in a world that cannot tolerate the “Jesus way” ...

So I will admit that when I got to this spot in my sermon this week I was totally stuck. “How,” I wondered, “could I offer any wisdom or inspiration for you or for myself about following the **way** of Jesus in this time in which we live that would be true to the **way** of Jesus?... The way of peace, compassion, justice, radical inclusion, and loving fierceness when up against the powers that be?

In this world, in this nation in which we live, where greed and violence, fear and injustice and corruption not only infect the air we breathe but the leaders we are supposed to trust... What,” I wondered, “Could I offer? Where are the cairns we might follow in the living out of our days that are true to the way of Jesus? And, even more importantly, how might we come to see Jesus in a way that actually raises our heads and ignites our hearts and creates a passion within us for following him?”

I am still wrestling with these questions. But three things came to me this week that raised my head and lit a little fire inside me... And so I thought I'd share them with you...

One is a tiny little image from Brian Doyle's collection of essays entitled "Grace Notes" in which he says that Jesus had starlight in his veins... starlight in his veins...

The second is from Belden Lane's book "Backpacking with the Saints," in which he writes about growing up in the swamplands of central Florida and learning in his Sunday School class about a Jesus who was so intimately connected with the world God so loves that he had Spanish moss in his hair and swamp muck between his toes... "The Jesus I came to know was wild," Belden Lane writes... "He saw splendor in what others thought repulsive, and he loved even me."

And the third is a memory I had tucked away somewhere until it somehow came to the surface of my old lady brain in a conversation I had with friends this past week... a memory of a time when my husband Michael and his friend Harry went to build a set of stairs for a couple who lived on the Kingdom Road in Blue Hill... their house consisting only of a dark foundation with no windows and a rickety ladder for going up and down...

A ladder the man of the house, sick and breathless and extremely overweight, couldn't climb, making him a prisoner in his underground home... unable to go grocery shopping, unable to stand on the shore looking out over the waters he had fished his entire life, unable to go to the doctors, unable to look at the sun by day or the moon by night...

And so Michael and Harry built him and his wife a solid set of stairs, finishing the project right around Easter.... Michael telling me on the day they finished the project about how Chet came up the stairs into the light of day, not so different from what it must have been like for Jesus as he walked out of the tomb just as first light was coming into the sky...

And as if the sight of Chet standing in the brilliance of a spring afternoon in Maine wasn't enough, after sitting in a lawn chair for a bit, he asked Michael and Harry to go back downstairs with him... He asked them to sit at the kitchen table. He put a bag of chips in the middle, and poured a class of whiskey for each of them... And then they ate and drank together... Michael telling me afterwards that it was the most sacred Eucharist he had ever received...

The body of Christ broken, the blood of Christ shared at a small kitchen table in the basement home of a couple of old Mainers with stairs ascending to a door wide open to the afternoon sun...

And I just want to say that these three images of Jesus... A Jesus with starlight in his veins, Spanish moss in his hair and swamp muck between his toes... a Jesus who sees splendor in what others think repulsive, and who loves even me... even you... a Jesus who is as present in a bag of chips and a glass of whiskey served at a kitchen table in a basement as he is present in the bread and wine consecrated by a "duly ordained and authorized" priest...

Well, this is a Jesus I would want to follow... And guess what? This is the Jesus we have... Underneath all the judgmental, saccharine, limp-wristed theology in which we have wrapped him over the

centuries, this is the Jesus we have... Read the Gospels through the lens of swamp muck, dark basements and what the world finds repulsive and you will see... You will see that that's where Jesus is, carrying in his very body the wild, unboundaried, untamed, unconditional love of God...

And even now, this Jesus is offering himself to us as a cairn, as a cairn of living stones for us to follow, one Jesus-step at a time... so we too might live in the Jesus-way...

Is it easy? No. But look, when we can't see the way ahead... When the fog of fear and uncertainty and despair are so thick we can't see our hands in front of our faces, we can join those hands, and we can stretch ourselves out and walk together in a line until we find a Jesus-cairn... And we can all gather there at that cairn and do it all over again, and again, and again...

And as we walk together, we can remind one another of the same promise Jesus made to his disciples... The promise that we are not alone... The promise that the Spirit of the risen Jesus is with us always to breath into us the breath of God...

The breath of the one who is even now moving among us with starlight in his veins and swamp muck between his toes, and inviting us to join hands... So, might we do so, dear friends, in the fear and the uncertainty of our time? Might we join hands and search the darkness for the next cairn of living stones? (*people join hands as Scott plays "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."*)

Amen...