

Transcript of Pastor Dan's sermon (extemporaneous) for May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

A number of years ago, I was hanging upside-down on the side of a mountain. Have I got your attention yet? For my job, I was a summer camp counselor for a number of years, and on the mountain that we had our camp at we had a whole section of the mountain dedicated to rock climbing. There were a couple of rock faces that we had a system set at the top of with bolts, chains, fasteners and all kinds of things up there that you would run a climbing rope through. And climbing ropes are these big strong nylon affairs that they tell us you can hang a mini van off the side of the mountain with and the rope won't break, as long as it's in good condition and you get rid of it after x amount of months or years. So we had these perfectly inspected and in good condition ropes that we would use for rock climbing, and kids would climb up the side of the mountain and there would be an adult down at the bottom with the other end of the rope. So you can sort of visualize it: the rope would go from the person on the bottom up the mountain through this series of fasteners and then back down to the camper. It looked kind of like a pulley system but it wasn't, because we weren't going to just pull the kid up. The kid had to climb themselves. We had all these complicated devices that I don't need to bore you with right now, but we would use those devices to make sure that the kid was safe, but we were attached to this rope so that if the camper was to slip or fall or make some sort of a risky play, this tether would connect us and they wouldn't be able to fall. And as they went up, we could take up the slack so that it was a little bit tighter and a little bit tighter so they wouldn't have the full distance to fall. They would just fall a couple of inches, get a little shock out of it, and then get back to climbing.

So, this time that I'm talking about, it was a Saturday—it was sort of a day off for the camp staff. We were climbing ourselves, because we really liked to do that when the kids weren't around. We could try some more daring maneuvers without freaking out the children. So, I was near the top of this climb—I had just finished it—and in order to come down off of a climb you needed to trust the rope and lean back and let all of your weight onto your rope and trust the person who was at the bottom who was belaying you—who was holding onto the rope and running it through. You need to trust them to be able to hold your weight, and you sort of work your way down, because down-climbing... there's a whole series of physics that tells you why you're not supposed to down-climb in that way. So, I was up there just sort of enjoying the air, and you always want to be in contact—you always want to be in communication with that person who's connected to you by that rope. And so, I called down and said, "You ready?" We had this whole series of commands to make sure that everyone was paying attention, everyone was ready to go; and the young woman down there, her name was Lauren—a good friend of mine and a co-worker—and she was belaying me down at the bottom, and she said she was ready to go.

So I planted my feet on the rock and leaned back and put all my weight on the rope as I had done many, many times before, and... I guess the ground that Lauren was standing on was a little bit slick, and also she was a number of pounds lighter than me. And, when I put all of my weight on the rope... all of my weight went on the rope... and—I couldn't see it from where I was on top of the mountain—but as it was described to me she skidded along the slick ground and went face-first into this large boulder that happened to be in front of her. The area around the bottom of the mountain was sort of big rocks all around, so she slid and slammed right into this rock, and just sort of clung onto it and clung onto the rope, and all the other staff who were around and were getting ready to do their climbs or just watching ran up and grabbed her by the belt. Meanwhile, me up there at the top—if you're wondering what happened to me—I just completely went head-over-heels in the most literal of senses. My heels went straight up, my head spun around back down and hit the rock—luckily I was wearing a helmet. Clap, right there on the rock. It sort of shook free my brain a little bit, and I had a moment to be dazed before I was able to look up—which was down—and see Lauren down there, hanging onto the rock there with Jill hanging onto the back of her belt there, and... we all had a really nervous laugh about it, and in a few moments everybody was able to right themselves, and Lauren was perfectly strong enough and capable enough to handle me on my way down. That's why I was trusting her in the first place. It was just a series of bad happenstances lined up in just the right way so that she was face-to-face with a rock, and I was... back-of-the-head-to-the-rock with my face... that didn't really make sense, but it felt like that in the moment. So I was able to right myself, Lauren lowered me down, and I made my way down to the bottom and we had a good laugh about it. And I only bring out this old chestnut every once in a while to embarrass her. But it was a scary moment, those few seconds when you flip and you spin and you don't know if you can trust what it is that you put your faith in this whole time.

And that's sort of what our Scripture passage today is about. It's about what we're putting our faith in, and it's about what we are connected too. See when you're rock climbing you are connected by this tether, by this nylon climbing rope, to a person on the ground. Whether you're doing this climbing on the side of a mountain or you're doing it in a rock gym, which is where sometimes we take our Youth Group. Usually in the springtime, right about now unfortunately, but we're looking forward to doing it again next year when we get the chance. But rock climbing is something where you have to trust the rope, and you have to trust the person who's belaying you. And the person who's belaying you is connected to you by this sturdy, strong, unbreakable rope—this rope that could hold a mini van off the side of a mountain. And that's, I think, what Jesus was talking about when he was talking to his disciples in our Scripture today. He was talking about how they were going to be far apart.

Jesus kind of had an idea about what was going to happen next. Jesus knew that he wasn't always going to be there in person so that the disciples could see and touch him and ask him for his advice... and get upset with him when he gave them all these strange riddles that they then wrote up in a Bible and it took us thousands of years to realize that we still don't quite understand them. Jesus was going to be gone from their sight, but he was going to send them something to connect them. When Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit, this Advocate, I can't help but think about this idea of a tether. This thing that will connect Jesus and the disciples—this thing that will connect God and all of us humans here on Earth. This tether, this connection. That's the purpose the Holy Spirit serves. The Holy Spirit serves to connect us to Jesus. Even though we can't see Jesus, even though Jesus sometimes feels so far away...

I tell people when I'm preparing for a funeral or when I'm talking a family through grief—I often talk about how thin the veil of death is and how close the people that they love are to them. It's like just around the corner, or as close as breath. The veil of death is very thin—the line separating us here on Earth from where Jesus is in Heaven is paper-thin, whisper-thin. But to us it feels like an eternal chasm, because we can't see it. Because we can't touch it. Because we can't speak to it and have it speak to us back in the way that we could to someone who's actually in the same room with us. It feels so far away; God feels so far away. But Jesus promised us, Jesus promised the disciples and promises us again every day that there is a spirit, a Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God can breach that divide. The Spirit of God can reach beyond Heaven, wherever or whatever that is or looks like.

To us, here on Earth, down here in the muck, down here in our homes... there is a tether that connects us to Christ. And that tether could hold far more than a mini van. And the person holding that tether, the God that we are connected to... I'll say, Lauren—I would trust my life in her hands any day, she's got better biceps than me by a long shot—but even her, a little bit of slippery ground under her caused some difficulty. God, on the other hand, is bigger and stronger and more stable than anything we could ever imagine. So if I could trust my life in the hands of Lauren, then we all are able to trust our lives, our souls, our everything in the hands of God, because God is never going to slip. God is never going to let go. God is never going to get tired, or get distracted by mosquito bites. God is always there. And sometimes that doesn't feel useful, because "there" is so far away. But not only is God "there," there is something connecting us to God. There is the Holy Spirit, that climbing rope to beat all climbing ropes that connects us to Christ—that connects us to this God that we worship. That means that we will never truly fall.

It may feel for a few terrible seconds like all is lost and we are head-over-heels upside down, our heads smacking off of a rock behind us, dangling upside down... sometimes we have those moments—sometimes those moments are years-long. But those years, or those months, or those days are seconds. Because God is holding the rope. The

reason that climbing ropes work the way that they do is they are made in such a way, the nylon is woven in such a way that it's not like an iron bar. When you fall, a climbing rope will stretch. It's not like you're holding a dog on a leash with a choke-chain, which—there're some ethical concerns about that in general as it is—but we don't have a choke-chain around our necks that will stop us the second something goes a little awry. We have a climbing rope. We have a rope that will give a few inches, a few feet. There's a physical formula in place for, depending on what your weight is and how far you fall and how high you are up and the tensile strength of the rope, that will determine exactly how far you will fall in any given situation. And I don't know that formula off the top of my head, and I don't know the formula for our climbing rope—our eternal climbing rope, the climbing rope of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it will feel like we are falling forever. But that rope is there, and soon enough... not in a jarring snap, but in a stretching and an easing, we will find ourselves at rest, safely in the arms of God. That's the purpose that this tether serves, this tether between us and God will never let us fall to the ground, will never let us truly be destroyed.

And so what I want you to do, what I think this message in the Bible speaks to us now—where we are right now today, especially, but even ten years from now if you're picking up this video then and the coronavirus pandemic quarantine seems like millions of years ago, even then this message I think will still speak. I want you to reach out, to feel that rope. Find that tether, whatever it is, whatever its nature is, because it's different for everybody. Everybody has a different color climbing rope—sometimes it's blue, sometimes it's orange, sometimes it has a pattern, sometimes it's a little frayed at the edges and you might think about retiring it or using it for a different purpose—but every single one of us has a climbing rope connecting us to God. I want you to reach out to it, I want you to find it, I want you to feel it, I want you to test its strength and know that that connection, that Holy Spirit is connecting you to God. The Holy Spirit speaks to us each in so many different ways, and it may speak to you in a different way than it speaks to your neighbor or your boss or your employee or your husband or wife or partner... the Holy Spirit is a little bit different for everybody—the way that it works—but it tethers us to God the same way. So I want you to be looking out, I want you to be seeking the way that the Holy Spirit is keeping you connected to God. What is it that you see every day? What is it that happens when you are at your worst moments? What is it that God is doing to keep you safe up there on the side of the rock? Because it's happening. We just may not be noticing it.

And then, I want us all to learn from that example, that example that Jesus set for us by sending us the Holy Spirit. "As above, so below." That's a cliché that people have been saying for a long time, but it means that the way that God works reflects something that happens in our lives. Or maybe... or maybe it means, what we do in our lives should reflect

what is happening in God's. And so not only should we reach out and connect to this rope, this tether, this Holy Spirit that is connecting us to God... but we should follow the example of above and seek to forge those tethers with others here on Earth. That's why Jesus—one of the many reasons that Jesus came to us as a human: to show the connection that God is making with you can be a human connection. We have wonderful examples of the ways Jesus connected with others while he was here on this Earth as a person. So I want you, even now—especially now, when we are spending so much time at home, so much time apart—figure out what climbing ropes you can forge between you and others. What ways can you help hold someone up on a rock, the rock that they are on now—the rock that maybe they've been on their entire lives. How can you help support them?

And it doesn't really work for my rock-climbing metaphor, maybe there's another metaphor and another sermon, but... at least on Earth, ropes go two ways. When we are connected to someone, they are connected to us. Support is a two-way street, and when we connect with others we will bear the fruit of that connection as well. And maybe that metaphor doesn't work with rock climbing, but maybe it works with God too. I like to think that God gets something out of our relationship as well. It's a two-way street. God is holding us up, and we are connected to God. And I don't know what that means; I won't know what that looks like until I am on the other side of that whisper-thin veil... but for right now, for where I am right now—for where we all are right now, here in life... we have a rope to hang onto that comes from God. And that Spirit that God has placed inside us, that has connected us, is the same Spirit that we can use to connect to others. So today, may you be someone's lifeline. And may they be that for you. And when all else fails... put your whole weight on the rope that is the Holy Spirit, in the hands of God, and I promise you you will never be disappointed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.