

“The Bislett Effect”

I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

May 3, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

“Life is a journey, not a destination.”

Some of you have asked us how our travel was two weeks ago to my 50th college graduation reunion. Not being a “reunion” person, my expectations were low. In fact, the time was great: easy travel, reconnecting with friends of over 50 years, and a fine time at my college.

It caused me to recall the poster in my dorm room: the picture of a train heading into the mountains, bathed in morning light or the twilight, depending on one’s point of view, and the caption, *“Life is a journey, not a destination.”*

This saying is no less true for having been frequently used. *“Life is a journey, not a destination.”* The season of Eastertide is as good a time as any, and better than most, to consider where we are on that journey. That we are just over halfway between Easter and Pentecost, when the Church burst forth from a small sect to a world-wide fellowship, makes it ever more timely.

For Woodbury United Methodist Church we can add to that the potential disruption of pastoral change. By July 1st, in a period of just over five years, WUMC will have had 5 pastors. It is absolutely true that the pastor is not the church. It is also true that the leader of any organization helps set the tone for the culture and spirit of that organization, and changes as frequently as we have experienced can be disruptive, especially where misconduct is involved.

Our journey is, of course, far larger than our immediate response to pastoral change. In 2024 we celebrated *“200 years in this place, united by God’s grace,”* a nod to our being on this corner of Woodbury for 200 years. There’s been a Methodist society in Woodbury even longer, since 1791. We could certainly be excused for saying, rightly, that we are resilient, as Rev. Thomason did in his masterful sermon on April 12. Yet today’s readings from First Peter and the Gospel of John point us to these questions:

- Who are we?
- Where are we going, spiritually and institutionally?
- Do we know the way?
- And how is the journey going?

I do believe the answers are fluid and will continue to evolve. But I also believe we have to ask the questions and seek answers, even if they are fluid and evolving. Otherwise, if we don't know where we're going and the way to get there, any road will do.

Eastertide affirms that we are, fundamentally, a resurrection people. Easter's promise is new and abundant life through God's resurrection of Christ from the dead. Has this promise made a difference? Yes! As the old hymn declares: *"I serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today, I know that he is living, whatever foes may say."*

In what new ways is resurrection power taking root in your life? Or have the last four weeks been "same old, same old?" Casting the net wider, what does resurrection mean for our congregation? Let's look at that through the four questions I outlined earlier.

Who are we? Whatever else we are, we are the *"people of God,"* the *"laos totheon"* in New Testament Greek. It's important because from this is the origin of the term "laity," which means anyone who isn't set apart to be clergy. That's nearly all of us, and even clergy started as laity.

Dr. Martha Myre, a United Methodist pastor, once gave a children's sermon on Laity Sunday. She asked if any of the children knew what "laity" meant. A general shaking of heads allowed her to answer her own question: "Everyone here is laity, including you children." At that moment an earnest and irritated seven-year old boy jumped in and said, "No, I'm not a laity, I'm a gentleman."

Maybe Dr. Myre would have been better off quoting from First Peter: we are *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...."*

Do we believe it? Some don't. It's a phenomenon I call "Protestant monasticism." The monastic movement grew up in the Middle Ages when some people lived in special communities and lived a "holy" life – that is, set apart and religious – compared to most of the rest of so-called "secular" society. A part of the Protestant Reformation was to reject that view in favor of the belief that we are all called to ministry by our baptism. Yet some of us today act as though the clergy were spiritual proxies for the rest of us: acting on our behalf so we don't have to. Nothing could be further from the sentiment of first century Christianity, or Methodism, or today's Church. As First Peter says, we are priests to God, God's own people. So that's who we are.

So where are we going, spiritually and institutionally, this assembly of priests? Our mission statement, printed weekly in the bulletin, says it well:

We are a welcoming Christian fellowship who celebrate and share God's love with everyone. We seek a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Inspired by His example, we strive to be God's hands in this world. Empowered by God's word, we proclaim the Gospel and serve through worship, study, mission, and community support.

Putting some “teeth” into that aspirational mission, this church adopted VISION 2024 in the latter days of 2023 and early 2024, expanded in 2025 to include six areas of ministry. That, too, is in the bulletin each week:

VISION 2025 EMPHASES are Evangelism, Missions, Affirmation and Inclusion, Communications, Youth and Young Adults and Congregational Vitality and Growth (Spiritual Wellness, Financial Health, Inviting Facilities).

These statements are both spiritual and institutional and push us to reconsider the earliest questions of Methodism, asked in small group meetings: “*How goes it with your soul?*” and “*What works of charity have you done?*” Both echo Peter’s words: “*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation....*”

The institutional challenges to this church remain real: a relatively small core of committed disciples providing most of the ministry, money and man and women-power. It’s the 80-20 rule: 80% of what happens is done by 20% of the people. It’s also why I’m fond of saying, “*Nobody can do everything but everybody can do something.*” If we tipped just 10% of our constituency into more active ministry, we would have an impact we’re not having now. Yet new people **are** engaged, as Rev. Thomason observed when he said, “*I look out and don’t know half the people.*” So new people are coming and entering ministry.

The spiritual challenges we face are those faced by everyone: life’s peaks and valleys. Death, failing health, job pressures or the pressure of unemployment or underemployment, the raising of children, care of aging parents, to name just a few. But what if we began to inquire more intentionally, for us and others, “*How goes it with your soul?*” What if, instead of being a member of the church like being a member of any other club, we understood ourselves as spiritual pilgrims, journeying on The Way? The Way. It’s the oldest Biblical name for the followers of Jesus later called – you guessed it – Christians.

So do we know the way? The first step is to know Jesus. He's clear about that, even if we're not. *"Where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going"* he says to the twelve disciples the night before his death. When Thomas famously questions him *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Jesus answers with one of the most familiar of his sayings: *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* Christ's love, forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation, humility and conviction are ways we experience the presence of God: *"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you know him, and have seen him."*

The Reverend John Wesley was once asked about the best method of preaching. His succinct reply? *"Offer them Christ."* Led by Christ, we discern a path for **this** particular church at **this** particular time. Refreshing this direction in conversation with Pastor Bill Florin will create alignment, everyone moving in a similar direction together. A great question that helps guide such a conversation is *"If our church was no longer here, who would notice?"* The short answer to that question is *"Many people"* and the longer answer is reflected in both our in-reach and outreach ministries.

This is, as the old saying goes, *"not rocket science."* Anyone who has pursued educational or professional goals knows this. Ask any high school senior (or their parents) about the college application process! Knowing the way means not only identifying and mastering steps toward a goal, but also having someone guide us. A colleague once said to me, *"I didn't struggle quite as much in my first church after I asked for, and was assigned, a mentor."* In Christ we have the supreme guide who not only **shows** us the way but who also **is** the way!

So: we are a royal priesthood with a clear mission, spiritual commitment to Christ as The Way; and a commitment to setting goals to get there.

So, how is the journey going? I've always liked travel and most of it I've done in cars. As a child I'd invariably ask *"Are we there yet?"* and my parents would chirp, *"Getting there is half the fun!"* As I've aged, I appreciate that more. Not just because my own kids tortured me with *"Are we there yet?"* but because I've come to learn there are pay offs that happen along the journey as well as the pay off at having arrived.

What's the pay off in this church for our spiritual journey? It's "community." We get to experience a community and build a community unlike any other. We have a love that knits us together and a special love in

Jesus Christ, who calls us *“God’s own people.”* Scripture describes it with a directive: *“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”* (Galatians 6:2) For decades WUMC has described it in a slogan, one displayed in our front entrance: *“Love Spoken Here.”*

Like most directives it is based on experience. The experience of the early Church was a love so powerful it overcame death. A love so powerful that the earliest followers of The Way gave their lives rather than deny what they had found. And what they had found, besides the resurrected Christ in their midst, was each other. As God’s own people, we have each other: to lift us up and encourage us. Our Member Care team, our Evangelism team, our Helping Hands ministry, Transition Academy, Community Services Council of Woodbury, Volunteers in Mission all reach out and care for others.

If you care a whit about sermon titles you’re probably wondering by now, *“What’s up with this title, ‘The Bislett Effect’?”* Here’s the answer.

It is a story from the sport of track and field. Runners know it as the Bislett Effect. The name comes from the old Bislett Stadium in Oslo, Norway. It was demolished in 2004 for a new stadium built a year later. And that, in my opinion, was a pity.

Why? Because the old Bislett Stadium was a place where track and field records were broken: not once, not twice, not ten or even twenty times, but over fifty times! No other track can boast of such a record for record-breaking achievements. But why?

The secret was the crowd. The old track was narrow, with only six lanes instead of the customary eight, and the grandstand was so steep that the fans were practically on top of the runners. Ken Moore wrote in *“Runner’s World”* magazine (Nov., 2003) *“The sound of 21,000 [fans forces] you to keep your rhythm, the crowd’s rhythm, for one more stretch, one more turn. The frenzied fans keep you going.”*

Runners are inspired by community—and so are Christians. We are part of a community that upholds us in the journey, following Christ our head, growing into salvation, for the purpose of serving the world Christ came to save. Ken Moore’s conclusion is “preacher-esque:” *“Our deepest nature is that we are at our most majestic when we do for others.”* The Bislett Effect: cheering for one other as we follow Christ and race the way he has paved for us, that as a royal priesthood we may serve him all our days. May it be so. Amen.