

The Way, The Truth and the Life
Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf
May 3, 2026

Every time I read the gospel of John, my eyes cross a little bit. So much of what John writes is such poetic writing that it can be hard to follow. There are people who love John — I'm looking at you, English majors, poets and theologians — but if you love Scripture then you must at least tolerate John, because among all the flowery language, John also includes some of the very best verses in all of scripture.

Today's scripture passage is a good mix of this. Jesus is speaking to the disciples right after the last supper where he washed their feet, gave them the great commandment to love one another, and told them he was going to die and one of them would betray him. This is what is called his farewell discourse — the speech he gave the disciples to tell them how to live once he is gone. And it has its confusing parts with all the "I'll be in you; you'll be in me" etc. But we also get this great phrase that has become one of the best known and quoted lines in all Scripture when Jesus says "I am the way, the truth and the life."

But even that is a bit poetic and might leave us asking what he means by it, so let's break it down a bit. First, Jesus says he is "the way."

Have you noticed that when you are in a store and you ask an employee for help finding something, some store employees will just give you an aisle number or point you in the direction you should go, while other stores have clearly instructed their employees to stop what they are doing and take you there? They literally show you the way; take you to your destination.

Pastor James Lawrence says:

"That, I think, is what Jesus means when he says that he is the way. At least part of it. It means more than that, but not less. He shows us the way. He also blazes the way. He prepares the way. He provides the way. He is the way — the way to heaven. The way to a meaningful life. The way to finding our vocation, our purpose. Jesus doesn't just give us instructions. Ten steps to finding our purpose. He shows us, he accompanies us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Come, he says. Follow me. I happen to be going that way. I will show you. I will walk with you.

But even more than that, right? Because Jesus is not just our guide. He himself is the way. Perhaps he is saying that he will walk with us and show us the way. But if we get tired, he will even carry us, if that is what it takes. Kind of like that great scene in The Lord of the Rings when Frodo and Sam are struggling up Mount Doom. Frodo collapses. And Sam says to Frodo, the chosen ring-bearer, “Come, Mr. Frodo! ... I can’t carry [the ring] for you, but I can carry you.” And then proceeds to literally carry Frodo up the mountain. That, too, is what it means that Jesus is our way. He is going to get us up the mountain, doing whatever it takes.

Now, it’s true that he might let others help. He might send a Sam into our life to help us. Or he might ask us to be the Sam for someone else.”

I think of the phrase “what would Jesus do” when I think of Jesus as the way. A simple question to help us think about how Jesus would guide us, what Jesus’ way would be, in certain situations. And when we ask that question the answer will often lead us to living a life that looks different. People should look at us and see something different. They should see something better than the world offers.

One way we might look different is our hearts. Jesus starts this passage off telling the disciples to “not let their hearts be troubled.” Of course, this is easier said than done. What does it mean to not let our hearts be troubled? Because I think it is worth pointing out that John tells us Jesus’ own heart was troubled several times - when he finds Lazarus dead, when he tells Judas he will betray him and when he tells the disciples he is going to die. Jesus is carrying a very heavy heart. But just like when you comfort a child in a difficult situation that you are also worried about, but you tell them, “it’s going to be ok,” Jesus is trying to do that for the disciples at this moment. To assure them that things will be ok, that they will be able to go on without him, that his love will continue to show them the way.

This assurance is for us too when our hearts are troubled and it is one big way that our lives will look different if we remember it. Because when the world is troubled, when we are facing personal challenges, when things get tough, when other people are panicking, it isn’t that our hearts won’t feel the trouble, but that we will know deeply in our bones that we are not facing it alone, because the way is not a set of doctrine to believe or a ten step process, it is someone to walk

with. To be on “the way” is to follow a way we can trust, a way where we are held; a way which offers us hope and strength in the most difficult of times.

Part of where that strength comes from is the truth, the second thing Jesus claims he is. Lawrence writes, “Truth is a recurring theme in John’s gospel, going back to the first chapter, when we are told that grace and truth come through Jesus. In John 8, Jesus tells us that we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. In John 16, Jesus tells his disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide us into all the truth. And then, finally, in John 18, Jesus tells Pilate he came into the world “to testify to the truth.” “Everyone,” he concludes, “who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Like Jesus is the way, Jesus is also the truth. He speaks the truth. He guides us to the truth. And by his truth, we will be set free.

To clarify, this is not little “t” truth. This isn’t truth about scientific discoveries or political policies or whether you tell the truth to people in your day-to-day life. This is capital “T” truth. It is the truth that is the revelation that we have to a God who creates, loves, and longs for us; the revelation that God is available for connection and relationship with us; the revelation that God is still active and participating in the world. Through the revelation of Jesus in human form, we know a greater truth about who God is and how God dreams the world will be. Knowing God in this way, we can live lives grounded in that truth, so that we are confident in how we work for justice and peace; how we understand ourselves as stewards of creation; how we know we are loved and are free to love others.

Imagine this truth like a compass. It doesn't tell you where to go — it just tells you what's true: which direction is north. We still must make choices. But without the compass, the truth, every direction looks the same. Jesus as Truth functions like that — not dictating every step but giving us a fixed point from which everything else can be oriented.

Which brings us to Jesus as “the life.” John talks a lot about Jesus as “the life” too. We have eternal life through Jesus. Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus is the shepherd who lays down his life. Believing in Jesus gives us life. It makes me think of the farewell discourse that Moses offered the Israelites as he was dying where he encouraged them to “choose life.” This life they speak of is what it means to live with purpose and joy; love and grace; wholeness and gratitude. This is a promise that we can live this life with confidence in there being something more after this

life, while also an encouragement to live this life to the fullest. It is an invitation to live a life with the same qualities of Jesus': to live with compassion for the marginalized, confronting religious hypocrisy, a willingness to suffer for others and an invitation to trust in God's love and provision. Jesus is the source of our life, the author of our life, the one who frees us from the fear of death so we can live this life more freely, more beautifully, more sacrificially, more joyfully.

It's important to take a moment to recognize that this beautiful proclamation by Jesus of being the way, the truth and the life, has been used in recent history, and still today, as a way of excluding others. There are Christians who say this statement is proof that the only way to salvation is Jesus and even among different denominations and sects of Christianity this verse has been wielded to draw lines about who is "in" and who is "out. There's a funny joke about this that goes:

A man arrives at the gates of heaven, and St. Peter is giving him the grand tour. They walk past a room filled with people singing loudly, playing instruments, and having a great time. "Who are they?" asks the man. St. Peter smiles and says, "Those are the Baptists."

They walk past another room with folks debating theology and eating potluck food. "And them?" asks the man. "Those are the Methodists," says Peter. Eventually, they come to a very long, high wall. St. Peter puts his finger to his lips and whispers, "Shh! Be very quiet as we pass this section."

The man whispers back, "Why? Who is in there?"

St. Peter replies, "Oh, those are the (fill in the blank conservative denomination)—they think they're the only ones here".

It's not that this verse can't be read as exclusionary, but to do that just doesn't take in the character of who we know Jesus to be. Just a few verses before Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life, he talks about how his Father has many rooms, enough for all, all are welcome. God is gathering a family, not a few chosen favorites. If we remember all we know about Jesus — all the people he found at the margins, all the ways he intentionally broke down barriers of class, gender, age, economics, race, ability; we've seen all the healings and feedings and miracles which are signs of the way God wants the kingdom of heaven AND on earth to be — then we know exclusion can't be the right direction. Jesus didn't mean that only people who follow our way, our truth, our lives would be loved. So, anytime we get ready to exclude someone for being different, believing

differently, loving differently, we would do well to remember just how expansive Jesus' love is.

One last note about this passage. My own reading of scripture convinces me that our faith is a group project. Our salvation is tied up in one another. We are meant to care deeply for each other and to use our lives in sacrificial ways for each other. And this passage gets at that with lines like: Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the work that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

But this passage is also so personal, so loving, such a clear example of Jesus trying to reassure, comfort and encourage his disciples for all that was ahead. It is a reminder that while our faith is collective, it is also deeply personal. Jesus invites us into an intimate, close relationship. This passage concludes with him saying: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." These are words of love, of heartbreak at the idea of leaving us, of making a promise that he will still be there with us. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, for you, for your unique life, as much as he is the way, the truth and the life for all of us who have found meaning and purpose in his life, death and resurrection.

So, yes, John can be a bit flowery and there can be room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding, but ultimately John is trying to describe something bigger than a simple set of instructions on how to live. John is inviting us to be people of the way, believers in the Truth, lovers of life, with the hope that our lives might be full of evidence to show for it. Amen.