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Proper 19 Year B

When I was in the first grade, our school took us on a field trip to Old McDonald's Farm in rural Connecticut. We got to pet horses and watch pigs play and do all sorts of things that felt incredibly exotic and special. Towards the end of the day they invited us to take a ride around the field in an antique truck. A large old man in denim overalls and a big beard helped each of us into this old rusty vehicle. He looked like Santa Claus in overalls, and I felt safe with him. But instead of taking the wheel himself he mischievously turned to us and asked, "Who wants to drive?" I was both appalled and terrified. Where he got such misplaced confidence in our driving abilities was beyond me. To make matters far worse, the first person to raise her hand was none other than my classmate Amy Lockwood. Amy was a bit of a loose cannon, honestly, as evidenced by the fact that earlier in the week she won (or lost?) a "Bangs-Cutting Contest" with her neighbor. So Amy, and her strawberry blonde forehead stubble, slid into the driver's seat and off we went.

The truck crept its way around the open field, with Amy giggling as she turned the wheel this way and that. Despite her best efforts, we were not at obvious risk, and I began to believe I might actually live. But I kept my eyes fixed on her nevertheless. When I finally permitted myself to look around, I

saw not 30 yards away a small rickety bridge over a stream, which it was clear we would be crossing.

This was not ok with me. I had successfully summoned the courage to sit still while Amy drove me and others around the field, but over a bridge?!? That was not acceptable. Clearly, no one was in charge of us, which, to a 7 year old, is sheer terror. I needed to take matters into my own hands. So I did what I thought any intelligent young girl would do: I opened the door and flung myself out of the moving vehicle. Upon doing so, I tumbled for a bit and came to rest on the side of the road, and watched as the truck made it safely over the bridge.

And that, my friends, is when the adults came running. The man in the overalls, my teacher Mrs. Quinn, and Nicole Landoli's mom, the (now hysterical) chaperone.

"Alison!! Why did you do that?!? Are you hurt?! WHY did you DO that?!?"

None of them looked happy. I had to tell them the truth.

"Because she was going to drive us off the bridge and into the stream!" I cried.

And at the very moment they yelled their response in unison, I saw what they were pointing out: "IT'S ON TRACKS!"

Indeed, for the entire journey around the farm the truck had been on tracks, buried from view, I must add in my own defense, by very tall blades of grass. At no point was I in danger. But I hadn't seen the tracks, so I hadn't seen that I was guaranteed to survive. I was terrified that no one was in charge, and so I was in charge.

This experience had a big impact. I got in trouble and I was deeply embarrassed, and the most dreadful of all scenarios for a first-grader, they called my mom.

But I also realized that if I had known all along that the truck was on rails, I could have enjoyed the ride. I would have had way less anxiety. I would have looked around me, rather than nervously fixing my eyes on a driver I did not trust. I would have known that I would travel safely, and get to where I needed to go. Even when that meant I'd be traveling over rickety bridges.

This experience has come to symbolize a key feature of the spiritual life for me. And that is, that no matter how awful the territory into which we unwittingly journey can sometimes be, no matter how easily it seems it will swallow us whole, no matter how convinced we are that no one is in charge — with God, our lives are always on track. There is always a destination, a home. And every single experience can take us closer to it. Even the ones

that look like detours. Even the ones that look like everything has gone wrong.

We are all sitting here tonight, on the threshold of something new — a new semester, a school year in person, finally back together, ready to begin a new adventure.

And this evening's Gospel is exactly what we need to hear. Because for all of our hard work and excitement, no matter how much goodness awaits us in the end, sometimes difficult times come first. No doubt there are more than a few people wandering around campus this moment, or even sitting here, who are new to Yale, who were so excited to come here, and yet who feel lost. Who feel like they must be the only one who hasn't found their people. Who wonder if they made a mistake. Or maybe even returning students, so excited to have a "normal" college year, but it feels different than you expected, and you can't put their finger on why.

In today's Gospel, we see Peter rebuked firmly for suggesting to Jesus that things won't go as badly as Jesus is predicting. "You are setting your mind on human things, not divine things," Jesus tells him. Indeed, Peter speaks for all of us who expect good things to come our way, who expect that success will follow on the heels of hard work and good intentions, who secretly believe that God will prevent bad things from happening to us if only we are good people. That when we leave places and people we love

— in Belgium, in Oregon, in San Francisco, on Maui — that surely the transition will be an easy one.

But Jesus tells us that to set ourselves on divine things means knowing that when hardship comes our way, it is never the final destination. Always, these tragedies and setbacks are portals to grace, always they have the power to bring us into greater life with God. We may, like Peter, set our minds on human things. We may desire security, we may desire conflict-free relationships and things generally to turn out somewhat as we would like them to. But Jesus' entire life reminds us that even when they don't — and let's face it, they so often don't — good things still await us. We still have a God who transforms our difficulties and mistakes and our misfortunes into bigger life.

The year may be full of rickety bridges and times when it feels like no one is in charge. You may look really closely and still you may not see the tracks that guide you. You may be terrified that you have gone off-course.

In those moments, remember that we have a God who never promised us easy. We have a God who promises us that with God there are no detours, there is no getting lost, there is no mistake or decision that can ever separate you from the fierce, liberating love of the God who made you and is drawing you ever more deeply into God's fathomless heart.

Being who you most are can be hard. Listening for God's voice in your heart can be a bit scary. And this is why we gather together, because it takes courage and courage is contagious. Faith is contagious. We know this story because it's written into our DNA, and when we remember what we share as human beings, this restless search for divine things — and all of us here have it — we know at a deep level that no matter where you come from or what draws you here tonight, we are indeed each other's people.

I am thrilled to be here with you, to join you at this moment, to walk alongside you as we embrace our shared vocation as people on the Way. No one here knows what surprises are in store for us this year but we do know when we take time to gather, to pray, to listen to each other's stories, we are more inclined to see the tracks in the grass that guide us even when they are hidden from view. We are more inclined to see with the eyes of Jesus. We are more inclined to see all around us an abundance of divine things.

Amen.