Sometimes life is like a steep, slippery cliff. We are like climbers trying to make our way to the top.

When I was a young man my friend Walter used to take me rock climbing. We would drive ten miles out of town in Walter’s 1972 Toyota to a place called Holt’s Ledge. We parked the car by the side of the road and followed a path for a half mile through the forest.

The path led to the base of a granite cliff. We took off our packs and began to organize small piles of climbing gear, raincoats and food at the bottom of the cliff. Then Walter looped a 150 foot climbing rope over his shoulder and followed a trail that wound around the side and back of the cliff and gradually up a slope to the top. At the top Walter tied one end of the rope to a large tree, about fifteen feet from the edge of the cliff, and threw the other end of the rope over the side.

While Walter was doing all of the hard work I was sitting at the bottom of the cliff, putting on my climbing shoes and enjoying a granola bar. Eventually I saw the rope coming over the side of the cliff, about forty feet of it coiling in a pile at the base of the cliff. I strapped on a climbing helmet. Then I put on my climbing harness and used a piece of climbing gear called a figure eight to attach myself to the rope.

Then I began to climb up the nearly vertical cliff. The first step up was always the most difficult. I used both hands and both feet. I always held onto the cliff with at least one hand, and usually had at least one foot supporting my weight. There were cracks and little ledges all over the face of the cliff. Sometimes I had to traverse ten or twelve feet to the right or to the left to find a way up the next part of the face of the cliff. It took more than twenty minutes, but eventually I had climbed 100 feet up to where Walter was standing at the top.

The first time I climbed up Holt’s Ledge I was terrified for the first few minutes. Eventually I began to trust what Walter had been telling me. If you follow all of the rules, technical rock climbing using a top rope is safer than crossing Fayette Street. Walter was belaying me from the top of the cliff. That means that he was taking up slack in the rope, so I could never fall more than a few inches.

But the main thing that makes technical climbing safe is the climbing gear. My climbing harness was made of the kind of webbing they use for seatbelts. It was unbreakable. It was almost impossible to cut, even with a sharp knife. Before every climb I examined my harness for cuts or abrasions.

Even more important was Walter’s climbing rope. The 150 foot long rope cost Walter a small fortune. The rope was a little over an inch thick. It was thick but a little bit stretchy, so if you fell your legs and arms wouldn’t feel a rigid jerk. The rope was strong. Walter said that if we tied one end to his car and drove it over the side of the cliff the rope would not break. We never tested out that theory but I believed him.

Rock climbing looks dangerous, but if you follow all of the rules it is extremely safe. For me it was a quiet, focused activity. Eventually I realized I could trust the rope completely. If I ever got tired while climbing I could just hold onto the rope with one hand and sit back in my climbing harness. I might swing a bit or use my feet to move sideways along the face of the
cliff. On a sunny summer day it was one of the most peaceful, secure places to be. I could sit in my climbing harness, just above the tree tops, sixty or seventy feet off the ground, enjoying the sun and watching hawks hovering above me.

The cliff we are climbing up right now is sometimes a little more challenging than Holt’s Ledge on a summer day. But the principle is the same. The rope is strong; we can trust it completely. We just have to keep climbing up and we must stay attached to that rope.

Our rope is the love of God. It’s the love Paul describes. *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.* Love is strong. *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*

Love comes from God, but God’s intention is that love would be in the center of our lives. The way of love given to us by Jesus is a different way than anything else we may have tried. *Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

If you are like me you have heard these words from 1 Corinthians hundreds of times. Don’t let repetition give you the idea that the love Paul describes is easy or ubiquitous or unsubstantial. Love is the rope.

Sometimes it seems we are climbers who are making our way up the cliff for decades. We have been climbing so long we might take the rope for granted. We forget the rope is there. Sometimes we forget that love is the only reason we have made it to this point.

Sometimes it seems we have been climbing up this cliff for decades and we came to a spot that was more difficult. Perhaps there was something like a small tree growing out of the side of the cliff and we decided it would be easier to just unclip ourselves from the rope and do this next part without being attached. Perhaps the difficult part came when things got really crazy at work or when something bad happened with someone in the family. For some reason we got this idea that we didn’t really have to stay attached to the rope, we didn’t really have to hold onto the way of love and the work of love.

Love is the rope. Without love we will fall and die. It might not be today or this week or this year but love is the only reason we have made any progress making our way up this cliff. Love is the only reason we have not fallen to our deaths.

Love is the rope. It was given to us by God. You see people holding onto the rope and sharing it with others. This love is what six of our members were holding onto as they went to Upstate hospital visited a man who suffered a stroke this past week. It is this love that strengthened one of our members to drive across town to pick up someone for church this morning. It is this love that motivates the woman who keeps coming back to that same place to serve, over and over again.

This love that God has placed in the center of our lives is all we need. Love is the single, unbreakable strand God has given us. Love is the strongest rope. Love is all we really need to make our way up through the beautiful places and the challenges of life.