

We of Little Faith

Matthew 14:22-36

September 1, 2024

Years ago, my childhood friend Beckie, who wasn't a regular church attender at that time, decided to take her 3-year-old daughter Katy to a nearby vacation bible school. She thought it would be good for her daughter to go and get some exposure to church, and besides, it gave her an opportunity to do a few errands while Katy was gone.

The best conversations between a parent and child often occur during our car rides. And so it was that on the first day after vacation bible school, Beckie and Katy were on their way home when from the backseat came Katy's sweet voice: "Mommy, did you know that Jesus had a mother named Mary?"

Beckie said, "Yes, I did. Did you learn that today?" Nods. Quiet.

"Mommy, did you know that Jesus had some special friends who followed him all over the place?"

"Yes. I think those were his disciples." A satisfied peace permeated the car.

"Mommy, did you know that Jesus *loves* me?"

"Yes. Isn't that wonderful!" said Beckie. Nods from the back seat.

"Mommy, who the heck is this Jesus guy anyway?"

As it turns out, a major point of Matthew's Gospel is to answer that very same question, which nobody seems to get right. *Who the heck is this Jesus guy anyway?*

In Matthew, Jesus' disciples, the ones you would assume knew him best, seem to waffle back and forth in their understanding of who Jesus is. They have certainty one moment—declaring him the "son of God"—and then soon are mystified by his behavior, marvel at his actions, and wonder about his words. The disciples are, after all, human. Sometimes we, too, are blind to what is happening right in front of us. How often have we failed to see something that is plain as day in the rearview mirror?

When I think of strange stories in the Bible, this is perhaps one of the strangest of them all. I am a good Presbyterian, and therefore I approach the weird and the unusual, the ones with a little hint of the bizarre, with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Healings—I'm Ok with. Raising from the dead—I got it. But this odd, bordering-on-science fiction story of Jesus walking on the water in the Gospel of Matthew? I don't know. Is it fact or fiction? Truth or allegory? Does it matter?

The center of a scripture passage, or the center of a gospel, can hold special importance. It's given "center stage," so to speak, by its author. What's before it and what's after it meet in the middle with a message or point, critical to the meaning of the writing. So here we are at the center of Matthew, nestled between Chapter 1 and 28, with Jesus walking on water—waves crashing and wind blowing so hard that the disciples were making no progress at all in their efforts to reach the shore. It's a moment of high drama.

How does this Scripture passage speak to Matthew's community of Jesus' followers who lived in Antioch? They were a mixture of Gentiles, and Jewish believers who had been recently separated from their synagogue. They were people of courage who had stepped out of the boat in faith to follow Jesus. But now, Jewish members found themselves experiencing challenges that they hadn't anticipated. The reality of their new faith was setting in: ostracism from their former synagogue, loss of their Jewish friends and relationships because of their beliefs. They were now in a little boat, sailing on a very large, uncertain sea.

The Gentile followers also had their share of problems. Their new faith divided them from their Greek gods-worshiping friends and families who didn't understand or approve. Their jobs, homes, social connections, all that they had known as meaningful and important in life prior to following Jesus was crumbling. Pressure and anxiety were building.

"Is this what it means to follow Jesus?" they all wondered. To be stranded in stormy waters rowing against the current? Everything looked bleak and dark, and their faith wavered. Where was Jesus anyway? Shouldn't he be back by now? Who was this man, this person, that they had given up so much to follow?

Back in Matthew, before and after our sea-walking story today, we see that Jesus has been busy—healing, teaching. And word has been spreading, and the crowds are growing. But through the murmurings and underneath all the chatter runs a common thread of misunderstanding—by the crowds, the Jewish leaders, his hometown, by his closest friends and followers.

Jesus is a mystery. An offense to some. A wonder to others. A miracle man. They are all amazed by his power, but they don't have a clue where it comes from.

Now Jesus has just fed 5,000 people, and he is tired. And so, he sends his disciples away in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee ahead of him, wanting to be alone with his Father to pray and recharge. The Sea of Galilee, where our story takes place, is the lowest altitude freshwater lake on Earth, but it is also surrounded by high foothills, which is a unique situation. When cold air rushes down the hill and meets the warm air of the lake, dramatic temperature shifts can happen, which result in unpredictable, sudden, terrifying storms. Surrounding it were villages and settlements that thrived on trade and the fishing industry, from which Jesus had called several of his disciples.

Matthew's community would have understood the fear of the disciples in the boat. They understood it on two levels. First, they knew well of the sea's violent wind and storms. And second, they understood it because they themselves were sitting in a boat tossed by the winds of turmoil they were experiencing.

Heightening the fear of the disciples, it was a common belief among ancient peoples that those who had drowned at sea lived there as ghosts.

Many hours after Jesus had sent them off, the disciples are in the middle of the sea, long after they should have reached the shore, getting nowhere, rowing with all their strength, battling the wind and the waves. Jesus, who had so recently calmed the sea back in Chapter 8, is not with them this time. They are wet, exhausted, and alone. They are scared. Our encounter takes place in the fourth hour—between 3 and 6 a.m.—the very darkest part of the night.

The scene is set. The disciples are in real danger, and their fear was in high gear, their senses on overload. "Look! Do you see that? What's that on the water? Over there—do you see?"

The only logical answer the disciples could come up with in their panic—"It's a ghost!" And it was walking right toward them *on* the sea.

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." It's not a ghost. It's Jesus. Yea! Imagine their relief. But there is more. There is Peter. You know, there's always one in a crowd of disciples.

"If it's really you, command me to come to you on the water!"

A simple response from Jesus: "Come."

If it's really you? If you really don't know it is Jesus, or you aren't pretty darned sure that it's Jesus, would you step out of the boat? I think not! He believed it was Jesus, right?

Peter has an exuberant faith and love of Jesus. While others might have doubts (but sensibly keep them to themselves), Peter just can't help but speak it right out loud. Now, with his doubts literally hanging out there in the wind, he puts his foot on the edge of the boat. Will he do it? Will his faith overcome his doubt and fear? Will he have the courage to take that first step and trust Jesus with the rest? Peter is a mixed bag of enthusiasm, faith, and doubts, who gets and doesn't get Jesus, says he would do anything for Jesus, and then we know denies him.

His faith moves him forward—he does it!

And then...he sees the wind, and he notices the chaos of the waves churning around him, and maybe he thinks about what's lurking under the sea he's walking on top of. He becomes afraid. He is so like all of us who have taken a step in faith and then start to doubt what we're doing.

"Lord, save me!"

Jesus takes Peter's hand. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

I don't feel a reprimand in those words. I feel the love and the grace that Jesus has for Peter, a gentle reminder of what Peter already knows in his heart. Peter is Matthew's gold medal disciple, the one who speaks up and says what the others are thinking, the one whose love for Jesus gives him the confidence, the faith, to take a risk, to go on an adventure with Jesus. Peter is Matthew's hero of faith and doubt, because even though he has his fears and his little slivers of doubt, he takes that step anyway.

Do you relate to Peter, as I think Matthew hopes that you do—his curiosity, his enthusiasm, and his doubts and fears? This guy is all in for a grand plan. He's definitely all in for Jesus.

Yes, Peter represents all of the disciples, but he also represents all of us. We are all caught in the back and forth of the waves of doubt and faith. The disciples understand; they don't understand. Peter gets it and doesn't. We have the faith of a mountain and then let a molehill get the better of us. But Jesus with his grace and love accepted Peter, just as he accepts us as the whole package of who we are. He's with us in the boat or holding our hand when we step out of it.

This week I was at our family cottage in Michigan, which has sat on Lake Michigan for 75 years. As if to make this Scripture very real and personal, while we were there, we had a series of storms. Weather on Lake Michigan, like that of the Sea of Galilee, can turn on a dime. And it did. We had some awning-flapping storms, patio-furniture-turning-over storms, blinds-banging-against-the-windows storms, and the wind shrieking through the doors and the windows. It was scary. Our dog shook like crazy and hid under the bed, long after the storms were over.

We've seen these storms before, but always from the safety of the cottage. This time though, I wondered what it would be like to be in the middle of the lake in a small fishing boat, without any power, struggling with the sails, surrounded by the waves leaping over the boat and the wind ferocious around you, rowing and getting nowhere, alone in the darkest part of the night. Talk about terror.

Fear is sometimes healthy because it heightens our senses for our own safety and preservation. But more often, it causes us to lose perspective, imagine the worst-case scenario, and holds us back from moving forward.

I have thankfully not experienced fear like that of the disciples on the sea, but most of us have probably had our share of scary moments. When our son Evan was diagnosed with Covid in the first few days of March 2020, when so little was known about the disease and people were dying, we were terrified and felt completely helpless. I've never prayed so hard in my life. Our lives are full of unexpected, sometimes truly terrifying storms that pull the rug out from under us.

I think it is interesting that in the first sea rescue story in Chapter 8, Jesus is awakened from sleep and miraculously calms the storm, yet the disciples wonder aloud about

who he is. "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" they ask.

But in Chapter 14, Jesus does not calm the storm right away, not until the drama is over. This time the disciples do understand Jesus' identity. Perhaps that is because we know and understand most clearly who Jesus is when we're in the middle of a crisis or a storm, when we have come to the end of ourselves and what we can do and learn the source of true strength and courage.

Then we experience, and fully know, Jesus as our rock, our friend, our comforter, and our companion in life. He gives us the peace and the courage to face whatever and wherever we are on our little boat and where it's taking us. Doubts are part of who we are, and we learn from Peter that's ok.

Theologian Paul Tillich said that "doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." Doubt and faith are a package deal. Our doubting selves ask questions like Peter asks questions, which leads to our desire to learn and to grow in our faith like Peter.

Who the heck is this Jesus guy?

Matthew answers that question now at the heart of his gospel in Chapter 14, when the disciples declare, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

The Son of God who can walk on the waters of creation, on top of all the monsters that dwell in the depths below. Walks through our fears and the storms of our lives to sit with us through it all. This is Jesus. He's in the boat with us, journeying with us, loving us through the howling winds and the waves that are so terrible, when we fear for our lives, are completely lost, alone, hurt, sick, angry.

The Son of God sits with us and then also invites us, with our doubts and our faith, to get out of the boat to follow him to something new, where we're perhaps afraid to go—to make the phone call that might heal a broken relationship, to forgive the unforgiveable that's been done to us, or to ask for forgiveness from those we've harmed. To do the right thing even if it is at a great cost, to give whatever it is in life that we cling to as our security blanket—our jobs, our money, our relationships. To do it out of love and trust, to be all in like Peter, the one to step out for an adventure with Jesus.

Ordained Presbyterian pastor, William Sloane Coffin, whose career exemplifies adventure, was a civil rights activist, former CIA officer, pianist, and chaplain of Yale University.

He captured Peter's spirit and love for Jesus when he wrote, "I love the recklessness of faith. First, we leap, and then we grow wings."

I am not a particularly brave person. Not at all. I was not an exemplar of faith, but when I was in my fifties, I heard Jesus say, "Come," his call to attend seminary, at what I thought was a most inopportune time in my life. I heard him say it many times in my heart before I did anything about it. I had lots of excuses about why this wasn't a good idea, but underneath them all, it was my fear of doing something so very out of my comfort zone.

When I finally ventured out of the boat, it was with my whole package of fear and doubts and faith. It was hard because I kept on working a full-time job with lots of responsibilities at work and home. I was a little like Fred Rogers who squeezed in seminary on his lunch hours—I did mine mostly in the evenings.

I learned quickly that I was a babe in the woods of my faith. Even though I was one of the more senior members in my classes, I had a lot to learn. It was hard, and sometimes I admit, I let my fears get the better of me along the way. But I always, *always*, felt God's presence with me in my little sometimes-almost-tipping-over boat. Despite challenges, it was a joyful journey, an adventure in learning and growing in my faith, and one I have never regretted, even though at the time, I wasn't sure where the journey would take me.

Did Jesus walk on water? That is for you to decide. I say "yes." It's too strange a story not to be true. I have come to love this Scripture with all my heart because I've been in that boat many times. I've felt lost and alone, afraid, scared to death, broken and uncertain at various times in my life. Maybe you've been in that boat too. Maybe you're in that boat right now.

That little fishing boat, rocking in the sea, buffeted by the wind, is an image that stays with us. The other image from this passage that I love, is that of Jesus extending his hand to Peter. As a child, you feel safe and secure when you hold the hand of someone you love and trust—a parent, grandparent, teacher. Those feelings of warmth, safety, and security—they never leave us. In the most intimate moments of our lives, we extend a hand to the ones we love. We hold hands when we are married, when a child is born. We hold the hand of those we love who are dying, on the journey home. It's a gesture of love that needs no words.

What could be more comforting for Peter and for us, than holding fast to the hand of Jesus?

A few weeks ago, I was approached by a lovely member of our congregation who quietly shared with me that she had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. My heart caught in my throat, but I couldn't be sad when she told me this news because she wasn't sad. Her eyes shown with a beautiful brightness. Her smile was so full of peace, and love, and even joy. She took my hands and said that she wanted me to know that she was not at all afraid because she had placed her hand in the hand of Jesus, who she knew would be walking with her on this journey. She joked that she probably wouldn't remember the conversation we were having ten minutes from now, but I certainly will remember it forever. I saw faith, no doubt.

Who is this Jesus guy anyway? What sort of man is this that the winds and the sea obey him?

He's the Lord of all creation, who knows everything about us, is familiar with every hair on our heads, knows our faith and our doubts, extends us grace we don't deserve, and who loves us more than we can ever imagine. He's in it for the long-haul and beside us in the raging wind storms of our lives. "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

And the same Jesus calls us out of the boat, gives us a holy nudge, or whispers in our hearts to come on an adventure with him. No experience required. In our strengths and in our weaknesses, with our faith and with our doubts, we're good to go. We will not be alone.

Come, you of little faith. Amen.