

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Linda and I visited the Holy Land a couple years back, the group went on boat ride on the Sea of Galilee late at night. Now, the Sea of Galilee is really a freshwater lake and not a very big one, only 1 percent of the size of Lake Erie. But it is subject to violent storms – the night that we went out was really pretty calm and even so, the boat rolled in a way that seemed pretty alarming, at least to this Midwestern boy. And even in this era of electric lighting and even though we were just off the shore of a good sized town, it was *dark*. I was reminded of all of this as I walked with the Gospel lesson for this week.

Imagine the scene. Here are the disciples in a boat during the fourth watch of the night, between 3AM and 6AM in the morning. Jesus has gone off to pray. It is dark. The boat is far off the shore, rolling in the waves. The disciples are rowing and not making much headway because the wind is against them. And they see someone walking toward them over the water. They are, to put it mildly, alarmed.

They cry out in fear, but Jesus speaks to them – “Take heart, it is I, don’t be afraid.” Now, Peter does a strange thing. He says, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water” and Jesus says, “Come.” Now, for Peter, the boat is safety. The boat is security. It may be dark, and windy, but Peter is a fisherman, he’s spent a lot of time in boats. Compared with the chaos of the waves and the spray, the boat is safety. And, of course, Peter, being Peter, steps out of the boat.

In seminary, it seemed like this text was always assigned in preaching class and so we were treated to dozens of earnest young preachers-in-training saying, “Poor Peter. If only he’d had faith.” Well, having spent an evening on a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, I’m here to tell you that stepping out of a rolling boat into the wind and onto the water in the dark to walk over to someone you can’t see – well, that may not be perfect faith, but I’m not sure I’d be glad to do it do it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, my frequent preaching muse, asked, well, what if Peter had pulled it off? Walked over to Jesus, gotten a pat on the back and then walked back over to the boat, talked the rest of the disciples into piling out of the boat and they all walked over to visit with Jesus, laughing and carrying on. Boy, Jesus, you had me going to a second there.

That would probably be a better story than this one. The disciples master their fears, start a Sea of Galilee hiking club, pass the second semester of applied miracles with flying colors and initiate the Kingdom of Heaven. Thanks, Jesus, we can take it from here.

That would be a better story, but it wouldn't be a story for us. Because, like Peter, we are afraid. Like Peter, we can't walk on water, not for any distance. OK, for a short time, now and again, we can rise above our limitations, we can raise ourselves up and be the people God intended us to be. But the truth is, routinely, living a Christian life takes more courage, more faith and more focus than we can muster.

Death frightens us. The loss of loved ones, threats to ourselves or our families or our friends brings out our usual coping strategy to either fight or to flee, when neither of these is the Christian response.

Loss of possessions, loss of status or freedom frightens us. When the economy turns down we forget that economic cycles have to run both ways, both up and down. We worry about keeping the things that we got along without quite nicely before we had them. We fear the loss of comforts or ways of living that we've gotten used to.

Relationships frighten us. We become fearful when people depend on us or when we depend on others. But loss of relationships also frightens us. We don't know if we can stand on our own, forgetting that we've never actually stood on our own. Love frightens us nearly as much as loneliness.

You can add your own list of fears – change or public speaking or tall bridges. And when we are afraid -- and it seems like we are always afraid of something -- then we sink.

It's a shame that Jesus' question is so striking – “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Why did you *doubt*? Peter was standing on *water*. Why did he doubt? How could you not be at least a little dubious?

Maybe the real question is, *what* did Peter doubt? Did he doubt that he could walk on water? Or did he doubt that it was really Jesus that was calling him? Or did he doubt that Jesus would keep him from sinking? I can imagine that he might doubt all these things.

It's certainly reasonable for Peter and for us to doubt that we can walk on water. But we also know he wasn't sure it was Jesus who was calling to him. We're here this morning because we think, we believe, we hope that Jesus has called us here. But there are certainly times and places where we're not sure Jesus is calling us, or what Jesus really wants from us and those are times of doubt. And even though we believe that Jesus won't let us sink, we've all had those times of failure and of humiliation where we wonder what Jesus is trying to teach us. If you've ever failed a test or been fired from a job or just made a mess of something – and who hasn't – you've probably wondered whether Jesus would let you sink.

I'm reading a book that most people read years ago – it's a book by Scott Peck called, *The Road Less Traveled*.¹ It begins as follows – “Life is difficult. Once we truly know that life is difficult--once we truly understand and accept it--then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.” What Peck is saying is that it is through solving life's problems that we grow not just in skills but also spiritually. Of course, life is difficult – why would we ever expect anything else? But as we deal with problems and difficulties we come to understand and embrace what life offers us, what God offers us.

¹ M. Scott Peck (1978) *The Road Less Traveled*. NY: Touchstone Books.

Which brings us back to the Gospel lesson. Did Peter fail? Well, if success is walking on water, he only lasted a short time, so he didn't succeed, because he became afraid. And yes, complete success means having no fears. But fear isn't failure. Failure, I think, is not getting out of the boat. Failure is being so afraid that we can't hear Jesus calling to us or being so afraid that we can't answer Jesus' call. Without that much courage, no progress is possible.

Failure is staying in the boat and never testing ourselves against Jesus' call for us. Peter got out of the boat. Peter mastered his fears enough to answer his Lord's call. The day will come, if it hasn't come already, that your Lord will ask you to step out of the boat and walk to him. And it will take all of the faith and the courage you have, because it is dark and windy and you're not sure what Jesus wants or even if it is Jesus who is calling. But you can do it. Peter did.

Amen.