

Matt. 14:22-33
Proper 14 - Year A
August 13, 2017

Even if you can't walk on water, step out of the boat!

Occasionally, Gospel stories generate cliches that obscure the Gospel meaning. "Walking on water" is one of those. We use that expression to praise someone extraordinary who seems to do everything with ease, and to criticize someone whose inflated ego leads them astray.

Let's explore that Gospel meaning: Even if you cannot walk on water, step out of the boat! Jesus will be there when you need him.

Abandoning ship calls for courage – the call to abandon ship seldom happens in good weather, there's some kind of crisis, and you grab your life jacket and hope there is a life boat nearby. Abandoning ship is scary. Unless you can walk on water.

I cannot walk on water, and you probably can't, either. As my grand kids would say, 'well, duh'.

So, *what* was Peter thinking? The remarkable thing is, he actually *did* walk on water – before his human limitations reminded him *he* couldn't do that. Jesus continued to walk towards him, on the water.

There has been much speculation that Jesus might merely have *appeared* to be walking on the water – it was a shallow area, a sandbar. Or, offered with some humor, he was 'tip surfing' on the lead end of his surfboard. A storm with big waves would make that possible. I love the image, Jesus on a surfboard, heading across the rough waters towards the disciples' boat!

Well, no matter. How or what actually happened is not the story. The Scripture is how the disciples remembered the event. It is the disciples' recollection that speaks to our experience, that creates the metaphor of walking on water, and affirms the gospel to us.

This wave-walking incident follows two remarkable experiences when the disciples shared in Jesus' power. They were sent out with minimal clothing, no food or money – and they not only survived, they discovered the powers of healing in Jesus' name. Then, the disciples participated in the feeding of the 5,000, plus women and children. Everyone ate their fill from the meager five loaves and two fish – food which Jesus blessed and then gave to the disciples to serve the crowds. Who wouldn't feel empowered by having a pivotal role in those experiences?

Now Jesus has sent the disciples ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he dismisses the crowds. Jesus was always pushing, encouraging the disciples towards independence, even in the simplest of ways. "*He made the disciples get in the boat*".

Being sent out by Jesus does not mean smooth sailing. A sudden storm comes up that night, pushing their boat far from shore. The disciples were fishermen, used to these storms. Unlike the earlier incident in Matt. 8:23-27, this time what frightens them is not the storm, but the completely unexpected sight of Jesus walking towards them... on the water.

“*It is a ghost*” they cry out. Well, I would be pretty startled, too. I hear an echo of Jesus’ unexpected post-resurrection appearances, the disciples did not immediately recognize him then, either.

Jesus calls to them. “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Like God speaking to Moses in a flame of fire at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Jesus reassures them with words that reveal God’s presence. *It is I.*

Peter - God love him – decides to test this God- identity of Jesus. He asks for proof. “*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*” Now, how would Peter’s being able to walk on water prove that ‘the ghost’ is really Jesus, that Jesus is who he says he is?

Maybe, if he can do what Jesus does, Peter will be able to believe in himself. *Call to me*, Peter says. *So I can do it, too.* Share in Jesus’ power.

I don’t think Peter’s test was boasting on his part. He was afraid. Jesus called to Peter, and Peter was able to let go of his fear.

When Peter realizes he *really is* walking on the water, he begins to sink. He cries out, “*Lord, save me!*” Jesus reaches out his hand, catching him, saying, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*”

I do not hear Jesus’ voice as angry, but more as chiding, maybe even gently poking fun at Peter’s antics. Peter’s ‘little faith’ was enough to spur him to leave the safety of the boat, to have the courage to answer the Lord’s call.

Having the courage to answer God’s call is, quite concisely, what we do at baptism. We let go of fear of death and step out into the water. We affirm our trust in the Lord.

Letting go of fear and facing ourselves, our human limitations, is as frightening as the thought of stepping out of our safe boat.

The reality is, even with all the grace in the world, we are subject to fears, anxieties, and pain; blind about some things, deaf about others. We cannot walk on water. We all need a savior and God’s grace.

Elijah (our reading from Kings 1) had his moments of facing stark reality. He gives into his fear and hides in a cave. “*I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts...I alone am left,*

and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Elijah witnesses an earthquake, a great wind and fire...none of which contain God. Finally the voice of God comes to him in the silence as he stands at the entrance of the cave. *‘What are you doing here, Elijah? Go!’* says the Lord. *‘This is what you need to be doing.’* And the Lord gives him the plan of action.

Even the most accomplished of God’s prophets can be sidelined by fear. God appears in unexpected ways to help us move forward.

A couple of questions occur to me.

When do you find trust in God most difficult?

How will you know if it’s really Jesus tossing you a life ring as you step out into the troubled waters of life?

So here I am, floating around the Salish Sea hanging onto my orange life ring. Surely, someone will see me, maybe pull me ashore, and I can tell them about God’s saving grace. They share in this amazing grace of God, even if they have never known that before.

In a way, that’s what I am doing when I am at the hospital, serving as a chaplain. I want people see my orange life ring and ask about it.

The question I hear about faith, even though unspoken, is this: *can I risk believing, being disappointed or rejected, or judged?* Fear is persistent, and returning to faith is not always easy. As Christians, our fear is defeated by faith in Christ.

Some time ago, I was invited to talk with the family of an elderly man who was dying. Our conversations extended over several days. Introducing themselves, the family said, *‘We’re not religious, no prayers or anything.’* So we spoke about the love and compassion in their relationships. Still, as death came closer, something seemed to me to be out of balance. I see a lot of people who don’t realize they have a belief, a faith, until they are dying, and then they discover it buried deep inside them. There all along.

I asked these adult children to talk to me about their father’s experience with religion as well as their own. They said their parents (both of them) had ‘no use for God,’ and ‘no interest in having a relationship with God.’

But what about you, I asked? Is it the same for you? Then came the information that one sibling attended church, albeit irregularly, the others were interested. Still, not one wanted to risk getting out of the safe boat of Dad’s construct of no-religion. It was their comfort zone with Dad, and they were afraid of prayer, rejection, disappointment. Thankfully, we arrived on a different shore.

We are sent out to share Jesus, who offers hope regardless of circumstances. Sharing Jesus with others is like carrying my orange life ring. In public.

That's part of Paul's message to the Romans. If we do not go out to proclaim Jesus' saving grace, how will others know about Jesus? How will they have the opportunity to call on Jesus, to call his name in their need? Maybe someone who sees you or hears you is searching for something or someone in whom they can trust.

We are called to introduce Jesus, to snatch the opportunities. We are not called to convert. We do the introductions – Jesus takes care of the outcome.

Peter had only a little faith – like the mustard seed, perhaps – *and* he got out of the boat, his comfort zone. Jesus rescued Peter when he began to falter.

Only Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on water. When Peter breaks out of his own fear, a whole group of people are empowered to affirm the Lord. The boat load of disciples says to Jesus as one voice, *“Truly you are the Son of God.”*

The risk-taking and trust of one follower of Jesus can make a difference in the lives of others.

I don't think we are called to be super-saints. I wonder, are we all commanded to try to walk on water anyway? To risk the seemingly impossible, to step into the wind and waves with courage?

I've got my life ring. And the name of my rescuer to call.

“Take heart, Jesus says, it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Amen.

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