

“Doubt on the Water”
Rev. Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
7th Sunday of Easter
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”



Sermon: *“Doubt on the Water”*

I always feel for Peter in this story. Peter has done so much to prove his trust in Jesus up to this point. He left his home and his life to become Jesus’ disciple, which is a great act of faith. He has continued to journey with him everywhere he has gone. And here in the boat, when he sees Jesus walking on the water, Peter asks Jesus if he can come out onto the water, too.

It took faith to believe Jesus was really walking on water and it showed faith that Peter believed Jesus could make him walk on water, too. And when Peter begins to sink, what’s the first thing he says? “Lord, Save me!” Those three words are a tremendous statement of faith. With those words Peter proclaims who he believes Jesus is, and what he believes Jesus can do. In that moment of panic, without time to think or consider his words, what leapt out of Peter’s mouth was a twofold profession of faith. But in between his act of faith and that profession of faith, something happens that Jesus calls “doubt.”

The story tells us that when Peter saw the “...strong wind, he became frightened, and [began] to sink...” In that moment two things happened to Peter. First, he experienced fear. And that’s pretty normal given the situation. It was nighttime. They were in a boat in the middle of a big lake during a storm. He had reason to be afraid.

But he also experienced doubt. And that would have flashed up suddenly, in the moment when he began to realize that he really shouldn’t be doing what he was doing. I imagine him looking around and thinking “This is crazy! I can’t do this!” And before he knew it, he wasn’t doing it anymore. It wasn’t so much a lack of faith in Jesus as it was doubt that he could do what Jesus was calling him to do.

When I was a kid, my dad taught me how to hit a baseball. He stood a ways back and tossed the ball to me and I would take my biggest cuts trying to hit them as far as I could. He started with little underhand tosses but eventually started throwing overhand. Those came in quite a bit faster, and the harder he threw them, the more they looked like they were going to bean me in the skull! So of course, I ducked out of the way. One of the first things I had to learn was to not be afraid of the ball. “If you’re afraid of the ball,” he would say, “you’ll be more worried about *it* hitting *you*, than about *you* hitting *it*.” And he was right. After a while, I got more comfortable and I wasn’t so afraid of being hit. Of course, after you’ve been hit a few times, you kind of get over that fear, anyway. But in spite of my dad’s efforts, I never really blossomed into a good little league hitter. And I think the reason was that I didn’t believe I could. When I did play little league, I struggled as a hitter not because I was afraid of the ball, but because I doubted my own ability to be a good hitter. I didn’t think I could do it.

Most anyone will tell you that the difference between good athletes and great ones, is not just ability, but confidence. And if you think you can’t do something, you probably won’t be able to. That was Peter’s problem. Sure, he got scared of

the wind and waves. But those had been present the whole time. It's not like the wind whipped up and the waves got rough *after* Peter stepped out of the boat. When he asked Jesus to call him out of the boat, the storm was already raging. No, he had faith that Jesus could walk on the water. He had faith that if Jesus called him, he could go out on the water too. And once he started sinking, he had faith that Jesus could save him. What he lacked was confidence that he could answer Jesus' call and do what Jesus called him to do.

And that is absolutely where a lot of us find ourselves sometimes. We love Jesus. We want to follow Jesus. We believe that Jesus can save us. But when it comes time for us to put that faith into action, to actually go where Jesus is leading us, to do what Jesus calls us to do, we begin to doubt; we falter.

I see it every time I'm in a meeting and the group needs someone to close us in prayer. You can almost hear the thoughts around the room: Not me, I'm not qualified. People get real interested in their shoelaces. They don't think anything they say will be profound or elegant enough. But think about that for a second. Is there some special gift that's required to pray? Does talking to God really require a certain level of education or a special vocabulary? No! Prayer is just talking to God and I assume that we all do that on a regular basis. But praying out loud, in front of other people, takes a certain amount of confidence that we often lack. And when we lack that confidence, doubt creeps in.

I think that happens a lot. We doubt ourselves and our ability to serve Jesus; to truly be disciples, all the time. And when that happens, it's as if we're caught in the middle of an argument between the voice of Jesus the voice of doubt.

- Jesus calls us to reach out to our neighbors; to love and care for one another. But our doubts say, "I'm not sure I can be that outgoing."
- Jesus calls us to share our faith with others, but doubt says, "I'm not very good with words, and people might think I'm strange."
- Jesus calls us to meet human need, but doubt reminds us that there is so much of it in this world and so many people are hungry, and homeless, and alone and afraid and "I'm so very busy and I feel inadequate. Other people probably have more to offer them anyway."
- Jesus calls us to love our neighbors and our enemies; to forgive and to not judge. But "there are so many people who think differently and who's politics and beliefs are so far from my own. I don't think I can be patient and kind to them."
- The Kingdom of God is coming, and Jesus calls us to be instruments of it. And yet "I am so overwhelmed by my responsibilities and debts and worries that I'll just have to leave it to someone else."

Being a disciple is so very easy and yet it is so very hard. Like Peter, we love Jesus, we believe Jesus is our Lord and our Savior. We want to walk with Jesus, but the path Jesus walks looks so difficult sometimes and we begin to doubt that we can do it.

You probably don't think you could ever walk on water. And I'm not telling you that you should try. *But* if Jesus ever calls you out of a boat to walk with him on the water, then you'd better believe that, by the power of Christ, you will be able to!

Compassion, caring, loving other people, getting off your butt and helping people in need, living your faith, sharing your faith, *that* is the life of the disciple. It's the life to which you have been called. And Jesus doesn't call us to things for which we are not qualified.

Now go. Love and serve God by loving and serving God's people. Trust that God will go with you. Trust that God will strengthen and encourage you. And trust that you are everything God needs to do the work of discipleship to which God has called you.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.