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"Walking on Water"
Matthew 14: 22-32

22 Immediately 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 towards them on the lake. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, 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.'

28 Peter 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 towards 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 worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

I grew up a lake kid. Our family had a lake cabin about 30 minutes from the farm, and we spent a great many summer weekends at the lake. Our cabin was on Lake Sakajawea, which if you've ever been out to Western North Dakota, you know is one of the largest reservoirs in the Midwest. We would spend many hours on that lake in boats, fishing, skiing, knee-boarding, searching out the best sandy beaches to wile the afternoon away.

One thing to know if you boat on Sakajawea is that the weather in Western North Dakota can be unpredictable and tempestuous. Hot muggy July days often brewed up nasty thunderstorms in the afternoon, and I swear that the lake itself had its own weather independent of surrounding prairie. It was not uncommon to find yourself out the big water enjoying a perfectly fine and calm day, only to find a sudden storm charging in over the buttes to the West and the wind to whip up

to gale force in no time. The lake could go from placid to giant 6 foot rollers in minutes. I remember a few times crossing the lake on these 6 foot plus rollers in a small pleasure boat. I can remember the slam of the boat coming down off of a giant wave crest into the following trough. I can remember being bounced out of my seat by the force of the waves. I can remember clinging desperately to the gunwales of the boat for security. I can remember being afraid that we'd ever make it to shore.

Maybe in hindsight I felt a bit like the disciples in our story. But their situation was probably far direr than mine. No doubt the disciples feared they'd ever make it to shore that night on the Sea of Galilee. No doubt they clung to their oars and desperately paddled for shore. No doubt they feared for their lives.

There's a lot going on beneath the surface of this text, if you're willing to dive into it with me, we'll see that it is a powerful story about discipleship and the saving grace of Jesus who rescues us. For instance, if you look at the disciples in their ship on the waves far from shore, we're meant to think of a symbol of the church and its people. The symbol of a boat for the church is an ancient one that is preserved in art and architecture for thousands of years. In many church sanctuaries you may have marveled over the exposed woodwork roof and rafters which are meant to evoke the upside-down hull of a boat. The idea that the church as a ship has set sail into the world at the command of Jesus is one that has its origin in stories such as this. We are the disciples, the disciples are us in our ship, the church.

Being the people of the church in our lifeboat, this story has a lot to teach us, the first major question it answers is **who is Jesus?** To answer this we have to start with the symbolic tempestuous waters. The waters of the deep in the Hebrew mind represented the chaotic forces that opposed God at creation. These same chaotic depths are calmed by God as he separated the waters and caused the land to rise and set the heavens to hold them back from flooding back in destroying everything in their path – think of the flood of Noah for an illustration of the power of this image. So, when Jesus walks out onto the waves the disciples are at first terrified, thinking him a ghost, for a figure appearing in the midst of the chaotic storm could not have been good.

But Jesus immediately reassures them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." For it was Jesus walking on the water. It wasn't a ghost or malevolent spirit. It was him coming toward them on the sea. And he was coming for a purpose, and that purpose was to answer the question, who is he? Jesus told them "take heart for it is I." In the original Greek, this would have been, with emphasis, it is "I, myself." The same words that God spoke to Moses as he stood before the burning bush in Exodus 3, when God told Moses, "I AM who I AM." And, "I AM has sent me to you." Jesus is identifying with God who sent him. He was displaying that he was Emmanuel, "God with us." That the power of creation and domination of chaos was in him. So, when he strode on onto the storm waters that night, it was a display of his power over the forces of chaos. His demonstration was meant to remind the disciples of the power of God to part the Red Sea for the Hebrews to flee Pharaoh, the will of God to pull back the waters of the flood, and of the spirit of God hovering over the chaotic waters at the dawning of creation. When the disciples see Jesus stomping on these chaotic waves – literally walking above them in dominance over them, they are rightly afraid, for what they are viewing is an awesome display of power over the forces of power, destruction, and chaos.

And this is the point of intersection of the story with our lives. The disciples are clinging to their oars, tossed by the waves, fearing for their lives, at the mercy of the storm. They don't know if they are going to make it. How many of us can relate to that image? How many of us can feel the waters coming in the boat? How many of us are struggling with grief? Or loss? Or anxiety? Or depression? Or addiction? Or separation? Or disease? Or financial troubles?

Or church, are you feeling a bit like the battered boat of disciples? Did you once feel strong and growing? Do you look back on days in decades past when the sanctuary was full to overflowing? When Sunday School rooms were insufficient, and classes and small groups met in chairs in the kitchen for want of space? Do you feel a bit beleaguered as the years have brought incremental declines in people, resources, vitality?

This is where we reach a decision point, isn't it? In the midst of our anxiety or grief or depression, or nostalgia, what do we do? Do we dig in and keep on doing what we've always done, only do it harder and with more conviction? Do we will ourselves out of the plight we're in, under our own power or force of will?

Do we grab our metaphorical oars and row harder? How is that going for us? Isn't it the foolish man who does what he's always done and expects different results?

In the face of all these troubles, we have to ask ourselves the second major question this text asks: **what if God is bigger?**

Who calms the storm? Who calms the waves? Who enables Peter to take few, brief, halting steps on the waters? It's Jesus. Again, and always, it's Jesus. And so again I ask, what if God is bigger?

- What if God is bigger than our fear?
- What if God is bigger than our constant worries and anxiety?
- What if God is bigger than our financial troubles?
- What if God is bigger than loneliness?
- What if God is bigger than our grief?
- What if God is bigger than the challenges that we face as the church?
- What if God is bigger than illness and suffering and death?

Ask yourself that question, and ponder how it could change things. Just let that sink in for a bit. And then let's look at the last part of the story, the part about Peter, to see that God *is bigger*, and that **the victory belongs to Jesus**.

To all of us struggling this morning with afflictions of any and all sorts, to the church who is feeling the force of the waves battering its sanctuary walls, we have our answer in this text. We are the disciples in the storm-tossed boat. Our only hope in the storm is Jesus – turning our eyes towards Jesus. Keeping our eyes on Jesus. Calling out in our distress to Jesus. Grabbing the hand of Jesus. Being rescued by Jesus.

Why? Because the victory of the storm wasn't the disciple's victory. They didn't calm the waters and bring the boat safely to the other side. The victory wasn't Peter's. He took a few faltering steps on the water, but when he faltered- when he took his eyes off of Jesus and onto the waves instead- he sank. It was Jesus who rescued him. It's like that in life isn't it? That's the lesson of Peter's water walking isn't it? That we might think we have defeated our afflictions, but our victory is only temporary. We can beat back the disease, we can build a dam to hold back the flood waters, we can build a mighty skyscraper in an earthquake zone. But sooner or later our bodies age – they're not meant to last forever – and

we succumb. The catastrophic storm comes and it breaks the dam. Given the great span of geological time, the earthquake shakes the building down.

No, friends, we aren't meant to win the final victory. That's why this story of walking on the water is so important, because it's a part of a journey that begins with Jesus walking on storm tossed waves, but the steps on the water don't end there, his path continues from the lakeshore to Jerusalem, and from there to the cross.

His path continued to the cross to show that all the grief and suffering that all of us struggle with, he felt too -that the weight of all of the pains of the world it crushed him on the cross, just like they feel like they crush us. But that that journey didn't end with the cross, because it continued to a garden tomb on a Sunday morning, when those same disciples didn't find a body, they found an empty tomb. And where Mary saw for the first time, her risen Lord, alive, resurrected. Having defeated the powers of chaos and sin and death for the last time. Showing that the same God who brought order to creation, pulled back the waters of the flood, parted the seas for God's people to cross, and walked on the water in a stormy night in Galilee, the same Jesus who reached out to Peter and rescued him from drowning, was the same Jesus standing there in the garden before her that morning. Because, though the sorrows may last for the night, joy comes in the morning. Indeed friends, the victory belong to Jesus.

Alleluia, and Amen.