

Derek van Bever  
First Congregational Church of Blue Hill  
August 13, 2023

### **A Buoyant Hope**

*“God never gives up on us; it is we who give up on ourselves, and on each other”*

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him*

Immediately he made the disciples get into a 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.” (Matthew 14: 22-33)

Our Scripture passage this morning is from the gospel according to Matthew. It’s an enormously significant pivot point in the gospel story, as Jesus shows forth fully both his divinity and his humanity, and as his disciples careen between terror and adoration, and between faith and doubt.

We see the human side of Jesus in his relentless struggle to get off by himself, to get away to be alone, to pray. Earlier in the chapter, we read that he’s recently learned of John the Baptist’s murder at the hands of Herod, and he must be feeling the impending threat to himself. Crowds of people have swarmed to him to show their support and, as always, to be healed. We see him here sending the disciples on ahead, so that he can catch those moments alone, with God in prayer.

And as for his divinity, well, let’s read and listen for the love of God.

(read passage)

How does it strike you when you come upon these miracle stories? Last week, Pastor Lisa preached on the passage preceding this one, on the miracle of the loaves and fishes, feeding the five thousand; this week, Jesus walking on water. And Peter too, for a hot second. Matthew had

a particular interest in collecting these stories; his gospel contains more of these miracle stories than any of the others.

As a congregation, we've historically had a difficult time with these stories, and we're not alone. Some have said that Christianity could not have been believed in the first century without these miracles, but that today it's hard to believe precisely because of those same miracles.

And there is perhaps no miracle scene easier to picture in the mind's eye than Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a storm. This particular image is shared in three of the four gospels, though the account of Peter getting out of the boat and walking toward Jesus appears only here.

If you're having trouble wrapping your mind around these miracle stories in the Bible, let me share an approach that Peter Gomes, the long-time preacher at Memorial Church, suggested. He said that as we hear these stories we naturally ask ourselves the obvious question, "Yes, but is it true?" He suggested that the question "Is it true?," while natural, is quite the wrong question to ask, for miracles aren't arguments or propositions to which there are yes or no answers. He suggested instead that the question to be asked about a miracle is not "Is it true?" or even "How can this be?" but rather, "What does this say?" At its essence, a miracle is a message—an illustration or demonstration of a message that God chooses to communicate to us.

So what does this story say to us—what lesson or lessons might it contain? As we read, Jesus has just fed the crowds who have flocked to him, and he's once again focused on getting away to be by himself, to pray. He sends the disciples on ahead in a boat to their next destination, Gennesaret (**geh-n-NEHS-uh-reht**), across the Sea of Galilee. He dismisses the crowds, goes up on the mountain, and comes back down early in the morning, to discover that the disciples are in trouble on the water.

So, picture this scene from their perspective. It is pitch black, the wind is howling, they're exhausted, and they see what they think is a ghost walking toward them on the water. This is by the way how demons were said to approach a boat—perhaps a first-century sailor's worst nightmare—and they are understandably terrified. They then see that the ghost appears to be Jesus, and he identifies himself using language that only God uses, the words that God spoke from the burning bush to identify himself to Moses: "I am." "Take heart, I am; do not be afraid."

Peter then does something that has been interpreted, variously, as either an expression of faith, or as the test of a skeptic, a doubter. He says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come," and Peter—I think you have to give him a little credit—steps out of the boat and begins to walk on the water toward Jesus. He then makes the regrettable mistake of looking down, and, like Wile E. Coyote in the Road Runner cartoons—as soon as he looks down, he's done for.

And then, as he does so often, Matthew describes Jesus as acting "immediately." Peter cries out, "Lord, save me!" and "Jesus *immediately* reached out his hand and caught him." Jesus then rebukes Peter, and by extension all of them, gently, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

What would Matthew's original audience have made of this story? We know that, at the time of the writing of this gospel, in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in

Jerusalem, Matthew's community was in turmoil. It's not too much of a stretch to imagine that they felt storm-tossed, in a small boat, at sea, with the wind against them. To that end, the image of Jesus walking on water, taming the storm, and identifying himself as God, must have been very comforting. It must have helped them to draw closer to one another, to strengthen their resolve to face their troubles together.

But what to make of Peter? Depending on how you look at it, Peter is either super faithful or super doubtful. Maybe both! And Peter's story is so relatable. The most intimate, and most vivid, story in all of the Gospels of wavering between faith and doubt. The power of faith to enable us to accomplish the extraordinary, to venture out of the safety of the boat, and the power of doubt to bring us crashing back to earth. (I was talking to Ruth Martin before the service, who said that the lesson of Peter here might well be "Sometimes you can do it if you're not thinking that you can't.")

Peter's faith falters when he sees that he is in mortal distress. That's the real takeaway from Peter's story for us—when the chips are down, Peter gives up on God, but God doesn't give up on him. God never gives up on us.

"Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him."

Matthew shares the story of Peter's brief walk on the water to dramatize the fragility of faith. Even Saint Peter, the rock on which Jesus founded his church, has the faith to step out of the boat and the doubt to sink into the sea. Peter, the first apostle, torn between faith and doubt.

It's odd that we vilify doubt--Doubting Thomas; "Oh, ye of little faith." Because, as Peter demonstrates, doubt is part of faith. If it didn't involve doubt, then it wouldn't be faith. We will never know the literal truth of these stories we have inherited, nor will we ever be certain of the existence of God, or of the divinity of Jesus. Knowing is the province of reason, and it is reason and not doubt that is the opposite of faith. Our choice as Christian believers is to live as if the gospel is true; to treat ourselves, each other and this marvelous creation with all of the love and care that God has shown us.

It is so common these days to see faith weaponized, to be used as an object of hate and division. It's easy to lose hope, to imagine that the whole enterprise is flawed. To those who would use faith to divide us from one another, I ask, how big is your God and what does your God stand for? Whom does your God stand for? Remember what Rob always said? "I don't care what you believe, I care whom you love."

That is what faith can do for us. It can help us through the most difficult moments of our lives, and it can buoy us as we offer help and hope to each other. If it's in the moments of our greatest fear that our faith is put to the test, it is in the moments when we pour out love and support for each other when our faith is on fullest display.

I came across a wonderful illustration of the power of faith to see us through our darkest moments in an interview with Stephen Colbert, the late night talk show host, on the subject of

copied with grief. I never knew this about him, but his family was shattered when he was just 12 years old when his father and two of his older brothers died in a plane crash.

Colbert credits his family's deep Catholic faith for seeing them through this nightmare. He inherited his mother's crucifix when she died, and he keeps it on his wall. He recalled, "My mother would pray to Our Lady and say, 'She knows what it is to lose a child.'" Colbert said, "Her example of her faith stays with me. We're asked to accept the world that God gives us, and to accept it with love. If God is everywhere, and God is in everything, then the world as it is is all just an expression of God and his love, and you have to accept it with gratitude, because what is the option?"

The interviewer then reminded Colbert said that he written somewhere that he had learned, in his words, "to love the thing that I most wish had not happened." In the same piece, Colbert went on to write, "What punishments of God are not gifts?" The interviewer asked him, "Do you really believe that?"

Colbert paused for an eternity (four seconds), and then said:

Yes. It's a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that. . . If you're grateful for your life, then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can't pick and choose what you are grateful for.

And then, so what do you get from loss? You get awareness of other people's loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply and so understand what it's like to be a human being. You can't have happiness without having loss and suffering. And in my tradition that is the great gift of the sacrifice of Christ. That God does it too. That you're really not alone. God does it too.

Isn't that lovely? We are all in this boat together. It's up to God to be there with us in our hardest moments, and it's up to us to be there for each other.

We are the people called, to live as if we are the chosen, to bind up wounds, to heal the sick, to give comfort to those who suffer, and to preach the fulfillment of a buoyant hope to all creation. When we stumble, when our faith falters, we can look to Jesus for an outstretched hand, and we in turn can offer that hand to each other. For the love of the world, and for each other.

Amen, and amen.