

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 13, 2017

Sermon by Reverend Rob Ruff

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 14: 22-33)

Immediately, [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds. And after [Jesus] 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 [Jesus] 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." [Jesus] 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 [Peter], 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 [Jesus], saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The Gospel of the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, just how recognizable is Jesus? During his years on earth, did people recognize him? When he comes among us today, often in the form of needy ones, do we recognize him? When he comes again — "*Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again,*" we pray — when he returns, will we know him? It's easy to assume that it isn't especially difficult to recognize Jesus. But, remember, we have no idea about what he looked like. There are no photographs of Jesus, of course. And every artistic representation that we have ever seen is based entirely on the artist's conception, on a guess, as to what Jesus looks or looks like. And consider that, according to what we read in the Bible, during Jesus' years on earth, it was often the case that even those closest to him didn't always recognize Jesus.

Think of John the Baptist. John was sent with the mission to prepare the way for God's Chosen One. And when Jesus arrives, who was, who is God's Chosen One, John wasn't entirely sure he recognized Jesus. John sent his friends to Jesus, saying, "Are you the one we are looking for, or should we wait for another?"

Or, think of the two friends of Jesus who were walking on the road toward the city of Emmaus in the days immediately following Good Friday. These two were grieving the death of their friend, their teacher. And when the now risen Jesus fell into step beside them on the road, they did not recognize him, did not know who this man was, until Jesus sat down to eat dinner with them.

And think of the inner circle of Jesus' group of friends in today's Gospel reading. Jesus sends them in a boat to go across the sea while he stayed behind to pray. The friends row and sail all night long. But by the first light of the new day, they have only reached half way across the sea, because there is a strong wind blowing right in their faces. As they fight the howling wind and battle the crashing waves, they see a figure walking toward them on top of the water. And knowing that it is impossible for humans to walk on water, they assumed this is a ghost. And so, seeing a ghost, they do what any of us would do, they scream in fear and terror. Jesus hears their screams and calls out, "No. It's okay. It's me. Don't be afraid." But even then they are not sure. Peter says, "If it's really you, Jesus, command me to join you on the water." "If it's really you, order me to come walk on the water with you."

Now, I don't know why Peter said that. It seems a strange, unexpected, even foolish request. If I was in the boat, I can imagine I might have said something like, "If it's really you, Jesus, come join us in the boat. We're terrified!" Or, I might have said, "If it's really you, Jesus, tell the wind to be quiet and the waves to calm down." But, no, Peter says, "If it's really you, order me to come join you." And Jesus' one-word response to Peter is, "Come." "Come."

And then right there, right there, is the clue on how to recognize Jesus. Because, you see, Jesus is the one who calls us to leave the place where we have a relatively solid surface underneath us in order to join him in a place where there is no sure footing. Jesus is the one who calls us to leave our friends, our family, our church, our loved ones, to join him out where he is. Jesus is the one who calls us from where we're comfortable, doing what's doable, in order to step outside our comfort zone and do what seems impossible.

Think of the Gospel reading from last Sunday. Jesus ordered the disciples to feed thousands and thousands of people, when all they had was a couple of slices of bread and some fish. That's the kind of thing Jesus did time and time again, isn't it? Many of the men in that boat had earned their living fishing. That is, until Jesus showed up. And when Jesus showed up, he said to them, "Drop your nets, leave you family, turn your back on your home and your community, and come follow me." He told them, "I will teach you how to catch people, rather than fish." And later he told them, "Now, I'm going to teach how to carry a cross."

Jesus asks us all to pick up our cross and follow him. And, oh, by the way, that's not an invitation to an easy life or to a picnic. Because crosses were used for only one thing, and that was death. Jesus is the one who says, "If you want to play it safe, if you want to hang onto your life, you will lose it. But if you're willing to take risks and give your life away for my sake, you will save it."

And that's how we recognize Jesus. He calls us to get out of the boat of the way things are and join him in walking on the rolling waves of how things can be in God's kingdom.

As one preacher put it, "Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly commands us to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and to show what our faith is made of. That's Jesus."

But, brothers and sisters in Christ, let's be honest. Let's be a little more honest than good Lutherans usually are. And let's admit that doesn't sound very inviting, does it? We don't really like to hear Jesus' voice calling us to leave the safe places and to walk on the water where it's dangerous, do we? Why would we ever listen to that voice of Jesus when he calls us to get out of the boat and join him on the waves? "Hey, Jesus, it's dangerous out there. And, oh, by the way, I don't think I know how to walk oh water."

The noted preacher and author, William Willimon, tells this story:

"The day following the horrors of September 11th, I saw a couple being interviewed on the TV news. They were standing on the street in New York City, in front of the still-burning wreckage of Ground Zero. They were obviously in great grief. They told the TV reporter of how their beloved daughter had died in the attack. Through tears, they shared their grief with the reporter. The television reporter, stammering, said to them, "Well, I know that you will be able to go to your place of worship this weekend and in there, maybe there, you will find some consolation in your faith." The grieving mother replied, "No. We won't be going to our place of worship this weekend because we're Christians, and we know very well what Jesus commands about forgiveness, about forgiving your enemies. And, frankly, we're just not ready for that. It will be some time before we will want to be with Jesus."

Jesus is the one who calls us to leave the boat and to walk on water, who asks us to do what is uncomfortable and what seems impossible. He asks us to feed the hungry, all of them. He asks us to bring justice to the oppressed, every one of them. He asks us to heal the sick. He asks us to forgive those who have just killed our loved one.

And, oh, by the way, we know what happened to Peter. We've read the story. Peter got out of the boat. He started to walk on the waves toward Jesus. But when Peter remembered that he didn't know how to walk on water, when he felt the waves lapping at his ankles, he started to sink. Peter, whose name given to him by Jesus meant "rock," did what rocks do when you toss them into water. He sank. And before his head went under, Peter cried out, "Jesus, save me!"

And isn't that how we often, probably always is in the life of faith? We step out. We take a few steps. But then we stumble, we fall flat on our faces, we sink. We call out to Jesus, "Help me! Help me! Help me!" And where is the good news in all of that?

Where is the good news in all of that, knowing that Jesus' authentic voice calls us to walk on water, where we will certainly sink?

Peter cried out, "Jesus, save me!" And immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught Peter, lifted him out of the water, set him in the boat, saying, "O, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

And right there, right there in the story, is the good news, is the thing we need to hear amidst our fears and our doubts. That Jesus, who calls us to leave the boat, knows that we will stumble and fall and sink, when our fears and doubts get the better of us. So Jesus stays right there, nearby, next to us, and he catches us when we sink. He steadies us when we stumble. He lifts us when we fall flat on our faces. He asks, "Why did you doubt?" Which, to my ears, doesn't sound so much like criticism as encouragement. He is saying, "You were doing it. You were walking on the water. You were feeding the hungry. You were forgiving your enemies. Why did you doubt yourself?" Then Jesus calms the wind. He let's us catch our breath as we sit safely in the boat. And then he asks us to step out in faith once again.

I'm reminded that many churches, this one included, are shaped like an upside-down boat. And so we gather here once a week to catch our breath. But then Jesus says, "You have to leave there, and come out where the wind is blowing and the waves are crashing."

Do you want to know what it feels like to have Jesus lift you when you've fallen? Do you want to know what it feels like to have him grab you by the arm and pull you out of the waves when you are sinking? Then I invite you to come to this table in a few moments. Hold out your hands and receive at this table the bread and wine that Jesus offers. He tells you that they are his very body and blood, given and poured out for you. Feel the holy food on your tongue, feel that drink in your throat, and know that it is Jesus, giving you his strength, his grace, his love, his forgiveness.

And then, with Jesus in you, literally, hear him say, "Come." "Come out of the church. Come join me where the wind is howling, where the waves are crashing, where there is risk and struggle, where there are hungry ones who need food, where there are enemies we need to forgive, where there is world far too filled with hatred needing to be made whole." Jesus says to us, "Come. Do what is impossible, and walk on the water with me."

Amen.