

Faith With a Divided Mind  
Matthew 14:22-32  
Collegiate Presbyterian Church  
August 7, 2011

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

### Sermon

As some of you know...  
because you have seen a certain picture...  
    there was a time when I sported a good bit more  
    hair and beard than I do today.  
I was in seminary at the time...  
    which made it all the more weird one day in the grocery store  
    when a child was overheard saying,  
    "Mommy, I think I saw Jesus over in frozen foods!"  
That may be a slight exaggeration,  
    but the truth is that more than once  
    I was mistaken for the Lord himself.

Well, clearly I'm not Jesus...  
    but if I'm not, who is?  
    What does he look like?  
    If you met him walking down Main St.  
    or around Ada Hayden,  
    would you know him?

Remember, we have no photographs.  
    There were no portraits done  
    that are still hanging in church parlors.  
Of course, there is the ever-popular "Head of Christ"  
    painted by Warner Sallman back in the 1940's.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.warnersallman.com/collection/images/head-of-christ/>

But we all know this is just one artist's representation  
of how the Lord might have looked.  
So, who was he?  
What did he really look like?  
Would you be able to pass him on the street and say,  
"Yep, no doubt about it... that's him!"

Before you answer,  
remember that in this morning's scripture passage  
even the disciples have trouble recognizing Jesus.

They are in the boat  
struggling to make their way back to the western shore,  
but are not having any luck.<sup>2</sup>  
Perhaps you noticed that Jesus MADE the disciples get into the boat.  
You see, the Hebrews were not water-loving people.  
Like demons and disease and death,  
the raging sea is one of the unruly powers in creation.  
And THIS sea on THIS night is particularly unruly.<sup>3</sup>  
The wind howls past, stirring the waves.  
It's one yard forward and two yards back.  
Water is rushing into the boat.  
Some of them are bailing... some are pulling at the oars...  
but it is clear to all they're not going to make it.  
They are going to die out here and it is dark as midnight.

Darkness exaggerates everything.  
A hundred yards in the daytime looks like ten miles at night.  
Night just does things.  
Did I tell my wife and children I love them?  
What did I not get done?  
I never expected I would die here.  
It is a terrible, terrible night.

Then just before dawn,  
somewhere between three and six in the morning,  
Jesus comes to them.  
He comes to them on the sea.  
But in their confusion and terror they don't recognize him.  
"It is a ghost!" they scream in one voice.

Then the figure speaks to them:  
"Take heart; it is I, do not be afraid."  
Yet, it seems that even when they hear his voice

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<sup>2</sup> This retelling of the story is adapted from Fred Craddock's sermon, "Faith and Fear," published in *The Cherry Log Sermons* (WJK-2001) 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long in his Westminster Bible Commentary on *Matthew* (WJK – 1997) 166.

they still aren't sure it is Jesus.  
And then Peter says something that I find very intriguing.  
Peter says: "Lord, if it is you,  
command me to come to you on the water."<sup>4</sup>

Isn't that strange?  
"Lord, if it is you, command me to risk my life...  
command me to tempt death...  
command me to walk out  
across 6,000 fathoms of dark, swirling, threatening sea."

I read this week about a pastor  
who had a classmate at their Christian college  
who repeatedly defined faith as "stepping out of airplanes,  
knowing that God will catch you."

This pastor's response was that  
surely God had better things to do  
than catch folks stupid enough to jump out of airplanes.

But you have to admit,  
there's a little of this going on  
here on the Sea of Galilee.<sup>5</sup>  
"Lord, if it is you, command me to risk my life coming to you."

Who is Jesus?  
Jesus is the one who extravagantly,  
recklessly,  
graciously,  
commands you to leave the boat...  
step into the sea... test the waters... defy death...  
all to show what your faith is made of.<sup>6</sup>

Well, I don't know about you  
but this really messes with the way  
I've always thought about this story.  
I've always thought this story contained  
yet another example of how impetuous Peter was...  
I've always thought this was about Peter's brashness  
in testing Jesus...  
I've always thought it was about Peter's failure of faith and focus...  
and we just need to willpower ourselves into stronger faith...  
I've always thought it was about

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<sup>4</sup> Here I follow several commentators who emphasize that Peter does not leave the boat until Jesus gives the command. However, I primarily draw from William Willimon in his 2005 sermon, "How Will You Know If It's Jesus?" The full sermon is available at [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org).

<sup>5</sup> Amy Hunter in her essay "Stepping Out" published in the *Christian Century*, July 26, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Willimon.

keeping our eyes on Jesus and never doubting.

And clearly, there's some truth in this perspective...  
there's some good stuff here for Christians trying to be faithful.  
And yet, maybe you're like me...  
my problem is not that I don't know  
I should trust Jesus more.  
My problem is that no matter how hard I try,  
I don't usually do it.<sup>7</sup>  
It's not that I don't know  
I should keep my eyes focused on Jesus.  
Honest, I get that!  
It's just that I get too easily distracted...  
I get so anxious...  
I get overwhelmed by the wind and waves all around me...  
and I just stay in the boat.

Though my preaching colleagues and I  
have loved to beat up on Peter for his failure of faith and focus...  
now I see that the greatest failure in this story  
is probably not Peter's,  
but the failure of the rest of the disciples  
who sit huddled in the boat,  
still wondering if they were seeing a ghost.

Do you remember how the old hymn writer put it?  
"Jesus calls us o'er the tumult, of our life's wild, restless, sea;  
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,  
saying, 'Christian, follow me!'"<sup>8</sup>  
Well, in Peter's particular experience on this particular day,  
Jesus is not calling him OVER the tumult...  
and certainly not OUT OF the tumult...  
though I would much prefer that.  
Instead, Jesus calls him INTO the tumult...  
and that's where Peter followed him.

And it should not be overlooked  
that he actually walked on water.  
Verse 29 confirms that just like Jesus,  
he walked on water.  
And though eventually the going gets rough and he almost sinks...  
though he catches sight of the wind and the waves  
and nearly drowns...  
the important thing is that because of his relationship with Jesus...

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<sup>7</sup> I appreciate and draw upon this week's insights by David Lose on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<sup>8</sup> "Jesus Calls Us," **Text:** Cecil Frances Alexander, 1818-1895, **Music:** William H. Jude

because it was Jesus who first called out to him...  
when he starts to sink  
he knows who to call out to in his trouble.  
And at just the right moment,  
“Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”  
Jesus stilled the wind and the waves, and Peter was saved.

Even when we get distracted and fearful  
and take our eyes off of Jesus...  
even when we can't be as faithful and focused as we want to be...  
even when his disciples falter, Jesus continues to save.<sup>9</sup>  
And it is because Jesus continues to save  
that it is possible for those of us who are back in the boat –  
bailing and rowing and screaming out –  
it is possible for us to say to Christ:  
“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”  
Knowing Jesus is the one we are walking toward...  
knowing it is his command we are following...  
and most important, knowing he is there to catch us when we falter...  
we can get out of the boat...  
we can do it!

Those of you who have ever taken a toddler to a playground  
may have had the following experience –  
Your little guy or gal has climbed up on the play structure.  
They are enjoying their newfound freedom  
and using their newfound mobility.  
And then, once they have reached an acceptable height,  
all of a sudden they see you...  
and when they see you they just start running.  
Arms flailing... legs pumping...  
and who knows what they are thinking,  
but they just fly off the structure into thin air...  
because it is YOU... because he saw YOU...  
and experience has taught them you will always be there.

Well I'm not suggesting you go jumping out of airplanes -  
God does not demand that.  
And I doubt if any of us  
is likely to have a trust as pure and certain in Jesus  
as a toddler does in his mother always being there  
ready to catch him.  
But even so, with Peter you can leave the boat...  
I can leave the boat.  
We can step out even if the ground beneath us

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<sup>9</sup> Long, 167.

is no more solid than churning water...  
because what matters is that we are walking toward Jesus,  
whose hand is held out toward us,  
stretched out in invitation...  
stretched out to catch us should we fall.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter.