

## **The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

August 23, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Matthew 14:22-33** Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

28 And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."(ESV)

### **"Defeating Doubt"**

Doubt can sometimes be healthy. Parents preparing their children to go to school have to prepare those students for the real world. Just because you get the walk signal doesn't mean every driver going through that intersection will stop for you. Just because your classmates say you don't have to do an assignment doesn't mean it's true. If someone online says they are your friend's mom and they want to help you with your homework, you might want to check with your parents before you interact with them. It might be discouraging not to be able to trust everything everyone tells you, but it will keep you safe. Just like ignoring those calls to sell you an extended warranty on your 20 year old Toyota or your hesitancy to give your banking information to that Nigerian prince who wants to give you millions of dollars.

For God's people, we want to take control of doubt. We don't want to let doubt control our lives and dominate our existence with fear. We want to take that doubt and dig deeper. We want to grab ahold of uncertainty and find answers. We want healthy fear to direct us to safety. And that's what happens when Jesus encounters his disciples out on the lake. Understandable uncertainty and realistic fears meet Jesus out on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. And for you today as we look at Matthew chapter 14, Jesus wants to use your doubt to find strength, reliance and rescue in Him. Faith focusing on Jesus defeats doubt.

This event takes place right after Jesus had miraculously fed a crowd of more than 5,000 people. He sends the disciples ahead of him to get to the other side by boat, promising to meet up with them later. They leave in the evening to cross back to Jesus' temporary ministry headquarters. But a storm prevents them from reaching their destination in a

timely manner. Picture Navajo Lake, but instead of tendrils extending in various directions, the Sea of Galilee is teardrop-shaped. The Jordan River enters from the north and exits from the south. On all sides there are steep foothills. Except in one area like a keyhole where wind can sweep down until formerly placid waters, batter against the opposite shore and ricochet around anyone unfortunate enough to be stuck out on the surface.

So it is already a stressful situation. The disciples might have been worn out, even exhausted. They might have felt fed up or even at the point of despair. But terror doesn't strike them until they see Jesus. Well, they didn't realize it was Jesus at first. They just jumped to some strange conclusions. Ok, maybe not so strange when they saw someone coming toward them on top of the water in the middle of storm.

Be honest. What's your go-to comfort when things get stormy? Do you scroll through your phone for relief? Do you chat with friends to take your mind off of things? Do you turn on the TV for distraction? Do you pour yourself a drink to unwind? Do you step outside to have a cigarette? Do you stuff everything down inside and just try to deal with it? Do you try to ignore it and hope it all goes away until it comes back and gnaws at you from the inside? We can't control what is going on around us. We have no way to dictate the events of our lives. We can reach for something to comfort us. We can turn to the easiest and most comfortable routines and the simplest tricks to distract us. Or we can look for Jesus in the middle of confusion. We can search for him in the middle of all the chaos. We can take Jesus at his Word. Trust in him to go where he directs.

Typically, this one root to the doubt that plagues our lives. We can do pretty well in our faith. We can keep focused on Jesus under normal conditions. Then, when things get stressful and stormy, we turn to someone or something else. We automatically reach for assumptions and superstitions and seemingly innocent habits. But Jesus wants us to have something better. When Jesus appears to those disciples in the middle of the Sea of Galilee he says: **"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."** (Matthew 14:27) Jesus is there. He lets them know who it is. He is there with his power. His presence and power work to give courage. Jesus wants to defeat our doubt. Without Jesus we can cope. But we aren't really defeating doubt.

Let's explore that doubt some more. Let's look at the example of Peter as a case study in doubt and trust. So many times we shake our heads at Peter. We quickly criticize him. But it seems like God chose to include so many events with Peter in them because he is so relatable. He's a lot like us. He's not some invented character from legends, but an actual person with realistic strengths and weaknesses. Maybe that's even why Jesus chose fishermen and tax collectors rather than CEO's and celebrities, or MVP quarterbacks and movie stars.

So what was Peter's great downfall? What caused Peter to start sinking? It wasn't overconfidence. Jesus commanded him to come out onto the water. It's wasn't some arrogance Jesus was trying to purge out of Peter's faith, to teach Peter a lesson in humility. Jesus always tries to build up weak faith and encourage inadequate trust. It's not even that Peter didn't put enough faith in himself, as if he didn't have enough boldness to finish the

job Jesus gave him to do. No, when Peter promised never to let Jesus down later, Jesus was quick to point out the rooster crowing would prove otherwise (Matthew 26:33). Peter's problem was giving in to doubt. It was getting distracted by the very realistic dangers all around him so that he broke his concentration from Jesus.

Let's use the example of wildfires raging all over the West as an example. Some of you know when these huge fires overwhelm local firefighting agencies, they call in reinforcements from all sorts of different fire departments from different county, state, and federal agencies. One firefighter friend described the work they did. Long shifts. Heavy equipment. Dangerous conditions. But they have to rely on their training. They have to focus on their responsibilities. Of course, they have to be aware of what's going on too. But if they let every stray spark spook them, they won't get the job done. If commotions from crowds or cameras get to them, they won't effectively battle that blaze.

Here's where we need the reminder that faith has to be in something or someone. Faith needs an object. I can have faith that my five year old can fly a 747. But thankfully her random button pushing would be very unlikely to get that aircraft off the ground. So I wouldn't really have to worry about her crashing it. It doesn't matter how much faith I have or the intensity of my faith or how strong my feelings are. If my faith isn't in something trustworthy, it is faulty faith.

So let's get back to Peter. He felt the wind. He heard the waves crashing. Then he took his eyes off Jesus. His doubts were based on real fears. But when he let his focus on the fears break his connection to Jesus, that's when he got in trouble. It's the same thing that happens to us when we spend so much time fixating on the negative reports on the news. Or when it seems like very college and corporation is unfriendly toward Christian morality. Or when family members openly mock and ridicule you when the Bible clashes with their understanding of science. Or when you struggle to consistently and efficiently apply God's word in your own household. Or when you have trouble seeing past the long days of unrewarding work. Or when you just can't stop thinking about all your medical problems. In any of those cases, the fears aren't the real problem. Letting doubt take over is what sinks you. Taking your eyes off Jesus causes you to submerge. You and I need to keep our eyes on the Jesus who defeats doubt.

Maybe this is the part where you start to wonder if Jesus was just toying with those disciples. He sent them out on the boat. He knew the weather forecast. He terrified them by walking out to the middle of the lake. Was Jesus just messing with them the whole time?

If you have ever spent much time with a toddler, you can understand what Jesus is doing here. Almost overnight toddlers go from demanding that you do everything for them to insisting on doing everything themselves. "I can do it by myself!" is their constant refrain. And then you stand back and wait as it takes them 20 minutes to put their pajamas on or put their shoes on the wrong feet or get their head trapped inside their sleeve and start screaming. We want children to eventually be able to take care of themselves. But they also need to learn to ask for help.

Doubt isn't the most dangerous threat to your faith. False assumptions are worse. Thinking you already have all the answers can sink you. Not carefully investigating can be catastrophic. If doubt leads you to look for answers, it can be beneficial. If doubt causes you to listen closely to the words of Jesus, it can be faith boosting. If doubt helps humble you and find strength in Jesus, then faith that focuses on Jesus can be stronger than your doubt. It's not wrong to be a spiritual toddler, you just have to know when you need help. Peter felt the fear. Peter gave in to doubt. Peter took his eyes off of Jesus. But when he started sinking he cried out "**Lord, save me!**" (Matthew 14:30)

Having Jesus handy isn't enough. Realizing his power is a good start. Little faith needs a God big enough to rescue and restore. Doubt is defeated in this Jesus. Faith focuses on Jesus to defeat doubt in the middle of danger.

Do you have doubts? Jesus is for you. Do you wonder what's going on in your life? Jesus is right there with you. Do you fear the storms raging all around? Jesus is reaching his hand out for you. Jesus doesn't respond to doubt and fear the way we would expect him to. No scolding or beating or ridicule or punishment. Jesus reaches out with rescue. Jesus reaches out with the same hands that were pierced to take away your punishment. Jesus catches sinking doubters with the same arms that are outstretched in compassion on the cross to spare you eternal ridicule. Jesus holds you to his body that was beaten and executed to spare you from ultimate fear and danger. Jesus holds fast to you with the life that was restored by his defeat of death on Easter.

So was Jesus toying with his disciples? No, Jesus builds up his children. Jesus was giving them the gift of understanding his identity better than they would have without this struggle. Through this ordeal the disciples were given a more accurate and clearer understanding of what Jesus is. They were able to gasp: "**Truly you are the Son of God.**" (Matthew 14:33) Jesus is defeating doubt by giving them trust in his rescue. Doubt is defeated when disciples develop resilience that relies on Jesus. Doubt is defeated when disciples find strength in Jesus to overcome fear. When your faith is little, Jesus gets bigger. When your trust feels weak, Jesus grows stronger. Keep your faith focused on Jesus.

It's ok to admit you are a spiritual toddler. You will never outgrow your need for Jesus. Jesus will never get tired of being there for you. The Jesus who rescues and restores is your God who defeats doubt.

*+ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. +*