

TAKE HEART

Mark Twain was accompanied by his wife on a trip to the Holy Land. They were staying in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee. It was a moonlit night and the weather was perfect, which gave Twain the romantic notion of taking his wife on a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. They walked down to the pier, and Twain asked a man sitting in a rowboat how much he would charge to row them out on the water. Twain was dressed in his usual white suit, white shoes, and white Texas hat. The oarsman, presuming him to be a wealthy Texan from the USA, said, "Well, I guess about twenty-five dollars." Mark Twain thanked him, and as he walked away with his wife on his arm, he was heard to exclaim, "Now I know why Jesus walked!"

Here again, as with last Sunday's text, we have a story about Jesus that is hard to explain. Was this an actual miracle that took place? Was this a post-resurrection story wherein the risen Christ appeared to his disciples in a strange, new way? Or, when the text says that Jesus was walking toward them on the sea, it can also be translated towards the water. This idea carries with it the possibility that the disciples' boat was driven by the wind to the northern shore of the lake; Jesus had come down from the mountain to help them; and so, he came walking through the surf and the waves towards the boat.

What actually happened during that early morning hour is cloaked in a mystery that is not so easily solved. However, the lesson of this passage, then and now, is abundantly clear! This story brought comfort and strength to the first Christians as they faced persecution and even martyrdom. The early church found that Christ stayed the oncoming of death in ways of surprising rescue, and they found that he saved them in death – in a still more surprising redemption. In death their eyes were opened, and Christ appeared; and death was not death, but life. Across the ages, in the hour of his disciples' need, Jesus came to them. When they were hard pressed and life was a real struggle, Jesus was there to give comfort and help. This comes as no surprise for Jesus' very name means he saves.

It must have been an awful storm; after all, several of the disciples had been fishermen on this very same sea in a former life before Jesus called to them and said, "Follow me." Thus, they were no strangers to storms at sea, but when the wind blew harder and the waves grew more violent, the disciples' fears rose as well. Things went from bad to worse when they saw Jesus walking on the sea and thought he was a ghost! But Jesus spoke and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

"Take heart, have courage, be at peace, for I the Lord am with you." When Jesus said, "It is I," the disciples heard and saw in him the very Word of God, who had spoken to Moses from the burning bush and said, "I am who I am." They began to identify Jesus with the God of creation, who was "moving over the face of the waters" and "who alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). They saw Jesus as the God, who holds ultimate power over storms, chaos, and evil. They experienced him as the Lord, who did not and

would not abandon them, even in the most fearful circumstances. Most of all, in Jesus, they felt the love and compassion of God.

It seems odd that Peter wanted to walk to Jesus on the water, and yet, a disciple wanted to do what his teacher did. So, Peter was just being a good disciple; he wanted to do what his rabbi was doing. He wanted to be just like Jesus and walk on the waves.

Thus, Jesus invited him to do so. Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But observe what happened next: “When Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and began to sink.” He cried out, “Lord, save me!” and Jesus stretched out his hand, caught him, and helped him back into the boat.

We could talk at length about Peter and how he was a strange mix of faith and unbelief, how he was a good example of what to do and what not to do, and how we are a lot like Peter – both at our best and our worst. When we are assailed by doubts, anxieties, and fears, sometimes we rise above them; and, other times, we sink in despair. The good news is that the very storms of life that test our faith can also inspire faith. For our fears remind us of our need of a savior, when we are unable to save ourselves from our worries. And, our fears can lead us to a deeper trust in the Lord. We can take heart from this story that Jesus never rejected Peter. He saved him and calmed the disciples’ fears.

All too often, we, like Peter, take our eyes off of Jesus and focus on our problems, and then we begin to sink and flounder. The key for us is to live as fully as possible in obedience to the call of Jesus. When we trust and obey the Lord and keep a steady gaze on him, then we find inner peace and strength to calmly address and overcome our concerns. This was what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he said, “I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Like many things in my life, I have had to learn and re-learn this lesson the hard way. I remember the very first time I preached on this passage. It was my first year of seminary, and I was taking a class on preaching. At one point, we had to preach a sermon in the seminary chapel, in front of our classmates and homiletics professor. I’m not sure why but I chose this very passage of the storm at sea, the disciples’ fear, Peter sinking in the waves, and Jesus reaching out to save them. After my sermon was over, I held it together until the end of class. But as soon as class was over, I headed straight for my dorm room, locked myself in, and cried for a good while out of sheer frustration! I had worked so hard on the sermon. I had given it my best but I came away feeling as though it wasn’t very good; the sermon just didn’t measure up, despite my best efforts.

That event took place thirty-eight years ago and, since then, I have preached over 1,200 sermons. Here’s what I have figured out. I need to keep my eyes on Jesus. When I don’t, I can all too easily get sidetracked by my fears and sink into despair. But when I seek to be obedient to him, when I trust him to help me, he has never failed me, not once. Whether my faith is strong or weak, thank God, for God is always faithful!

This morning, we gathered around the baptismal font and vowed to do our part to help Mason and Grace to become disciples of Jesus. We have every intention of keeping those sacred vows, and yet, one way or another, we will falter. But, thankfully, baptism isn’t about our faith so much as it is about the faithfulness of God, who will see to it that the divine promises are kept and that Mason and Grace will love and serve the Lord.

And this morning, we will also gather at the table of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As he said to Peter, so he speaks the word to us, “Come.” And, when we fail him, when we sin

and cry out, “Lord, save me,” he does. He restores us, he nourishes us, and he loves us now and forever. So, let us take heart!

Let us join with Jesus’ disciples everywhere and in every age and worship him and confess him, saying: “Truly you are the Son of God!” Amen.

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