

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 29, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
GETTING OUT OF THE BOAT
Matthew 14:22-33**

We return this morning to the Gospel of Matthew, to Matthew's account of Jesus – and Peter – walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee. I invite you to turn in your Bible, the Bible in your pew, or on your phone or tablet and follow along as I read from Matthew 14:22-33. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's inspired and unerring Word, because it is the final and only infallible rule for what we are to believe and how we are to live as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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As we saw two weeks ago, this is one of the most amazing and truly miraculous scenes in the New Testament. Matthew, remember, was an eyewitness to these things; he was in the boat with the other disciples when they saw Jesus walking on the water; he saw it with his own eyes. And, he saw Peter get out of the boat at Jesus' invitation and begin walking toward Jesus on the water. Like the others in the boat, he saw it all with his own eyes.

It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer that this is not the sort of thing that happens every day. When you get up in the morning, it is not the sort of thing you expect to happen at some point in your day. Contrary to miracle-deniers, it was precisely that – a miracle meant to reveal the true identity of Jesus as the Son of God, in whom, as Paul writes in Colossians 2:9, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message* amplifies Paul's meaning: “Everything of God,” *The Message* says, “gets expressed in (Jesus), so you can see and hear Him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without Him” (Colossians 2:9-10, *MSG*).

Even though the events of Jesus' life are in the past, we don't need a telescope or a microscope to know who Jesus is. God knows you will *never* need a horoscope. Not for any reason! We know more about the identity and love and saving power of Jesus than the disciples did – at least at this point in their relationship with Him. Later, it would all make sense to them. But not yet. We know how the story of Jesus' life ends; the disciples were still living the story with Jesus.

After the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21), which is itself a revelatory moment in the life of Jesus, we're told in verse 22 that Jesus has the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the lake while He stays behind to dismiss the crowd. Have you ever wondered if the disciples wondered how Jesus was going to catch up with them? Maybe there was another boat He was planning to use?

My brother Gary has written a new book about Mark Twain to be published next month by Oxford University Press. I'm so proud of him. I think this is his 13th or 14th book to be published. It is a religious biography entitled *Mark Twain: Preacher, Prophet, and Social Philosopher*. Gary asked Mary Sue and me to proofread a couple chapters of the book for him, which whetted my appetite to read the whole book.

On one of their visits to the Holy Land, Twain and his wife were staying in Tiberias, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a moonlit night, Twain was feeling romantic, and wanted to take his wife for a boat ride on the lake. They walked down to the pier. Seeing a man in a rowboat, Twain asked how much he would charge to take them for a ride out on the lake. Twain was dressed in his trademark white suit, white shoes, and white Texas hat. The man in the boat, thinking Twain must be a wealthy rancher from the US, said: "I guess, about \$25." [\$25 back then is equivalent to more than \$800 today.] Twain thanked the man and as he turned away, he said to his wife: "Now I know why Jesus walked!"

Do you think that's why Jesus walked on the water that night? I don't think so. In one sense, the reason Jesus walked on the water is because He could. He could, because of who He was and is. He could, because He is the Son of God, the Lord of winds and waves and storms. He did it, so His followers then and now would learn that the storms we encounter in life will not and cannot keep Him from us. In fact, the storms of life, those difficult experiences we would rather not have to endure, can actually bring us closer to Him and cause us to grow in our faith. I know it is true in my life.

So, after sending the disciples on ahead and dispersing the crowd, Jesus took time to be alone to pray. He understood the importance of solitude in a way that too few of us appreciate in our noisy, distraction-saturated world. He set aside time to be alone with the Father in prayer. In doing so, He gave us an example that we should follow in His steps. Some of us struggle to be consistent in our prayer life. Jesus made it a priority.

While Jesus was praying and the disciples were out on the lake, the storm came up. It was a whopper. As the disciples battled the storm, "Jesus went out to them, walking on the water" (14:25). Matthew says it so matter-of-factly, as if this were perfectly normal. It was *not* perfectly normal, of course, and the disciples were terrified. "They were scared out of their wits" (14:26, *MSG*). They thought it must be a ghost, even though they had never seen a ghost before.

A ghost it was not. It was Jesus, their Teacher, their Master, the Son of God, God in flesh and blood. Hearing the fear in their voices, and seeing it in their eyes, Jesus called out to them: "It is I. Don't be afraid" (14:27).

Mark and John also include this walking-on-the-water episode in their Gospels, but only Matthew tells us of Peter joining Jesus on the water. I think it is safe to assume that when Peter got out of bed that morning, he didn't say to himself: "You know, I think I'll go for a walk out on the lake today." But that is exactly what he did, in the middle of the night, in the midst of the storm.

Hearing the voice of Jesus gave the disciples some much needed reassurance. Peter, though, wasn't content to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. Characteristically – we might say impulsively – he piped up and made a bold request: “Lord, if it's you” – if it's really you and not an apparition – “tell me to come to you on the water. Let me walk on the water just like you” (14:28).

The rest of the disciples must have thought: “Peter, are you crazy? What are you thinking?”

But what did Jesus say? “Come on” (14:29). He gave Peter permission to get out of the boat and walk on the water to Him.

You have to admit that Peter demonstrates remarkable faith here. The permission given by Jesus confronts Peter with a decision. It took faith – real faith – to get Peter out of the boat. As Warren Wiersbe says, anybody can sit in a boat and watch; it takes a person of real faith and courage to get out of the boat and walk on the water (Wiersbe, *Matthew: Be Loyal*, 98). Isn't that the truth!

The thing about Peter's faith is this: It was strong enough to get him out of the boat. It was strong enough to enable him to actually walk on the water toward Jesus. But it was not strong enough to withstand the storm, was it? Peter actually walked on the water. In defiance of the laws of nature, he took one step and then another, and walked on the water toward Jesus.

You know what happened next. He took his eyes off Jesus. Peter shifted his focus from Jesus to the storm raging all around him. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he could safely walk on the water. But when he focused instead on the wind and the waves, he began to sink. His faith gave way to panic and fear.

Fear can suck the life out of faith. It was true for Peter. It is true for you and me. We live in frightening times. Danger lurks all around us. There is no shortage of things to be afraid of. Fear can paralyze you. It can keep you from getting out of the boat in which it has trapped you. It could easily have prevented Peter from getting out of the boat. That Peter got out of the boat in the first place says something about the measure of his faith. It was not perfect, not by a long shot, but it was real. He trusted Jesus enough to get out of the boat, and that was enough for Jesus to give him permission to come.

You can let fear defeat you. Writer Dave Barry says: “All of us are born with a set of instinctive fears: of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, of speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words: ‘Some assembly required’” (Quoted in John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water*, 122). Maybe the fear you live with is one or more of these, especially “some assembly required.” Maybe for you it is the fear of failure. Or the fear of inadequacy. It could be the fear of embarrassment or humiliation. It could be the fear of disappointing someone. Or the fear of being disappointed. Maybe it is the fear of hurting someone. Or the fear of being hurt. It could be the fear of getting

stuck. Or the fear of losing someone you love. Maybe it is the fear of COVID or a terrorist attack.

At first, Peter did not let his fear get in the way of his faith. Did he step out of the boat with bold confidence or timid uncertainty? Hard to say. The point is that Peter did get out of the boat. Whatever fear he felt did not prevent him from taking the first step. And then the second.

But then his faith faltered. Which shows that Peter is both a good example for us and a not-so-good example. His faith faltered because he lost his focus. Which has an obvious application to your life and mine. Are you more focused on your circumstances or your Savior? Are you more focused on the storms – and there are plenty of them, literally and figuratively – or on Jesus, who comes to you and is with you in all the storms your life will ever hold? Are your eyes fixed on Jesus as you run with perseverance the race God has ordained for you to run? (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Jesus, as we see in verse 31, chides Peter for the smallness of his faith. True enough, Peter's faith was small and needed to grow. But it was real. And if our faith is revealed by our actions, Peter's faith was way bigger than that of his comrades in discipleship.

Even when his faith faltered, when the storm got his attention and he began to sink, Peter did the right thing. He cried out to Jesus for help. And instantly Jesus reached out, grabbed his hand, and brought him to safety.

One of the most influential books I have ever read is John Ortberg's *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. Hard to believe, the book was published 20 years ago. If you have never read it, I urge you to do so. If you've read it before, I encourage you to read it again. I was re-reading it this week and wish I could walk you through the insights I've gained and the inspiration I've received from this book. It was this book that God used to get me out of the boat to pursue my Doctor of Ministry years ago. I'm so thankful for the push this book gave me and for the ways it has continued to influence my life. Agreeing to serve on the National Leadership Team for the EPC is another one of those getting-out-of-the-boat experiences for me.

I want to share a small portion of what Ortberg says about Peter and his water-walking experience. "The day (Peter) got out of a boat and walked on the water," he says, "is unforgettable not so much because of where he was walking as what he was walking *on* and who he was walking *with*." Ortberg suggests that we let Peter's water-walking be a picture of doing with God's help what we could never do on our own.

When God wants to use you in some way, Ortberg says, there is always a *call*. God asks an ordinary person like you or me to engage in an act of extraordinary trust, that of getting out of the boat where life is comfortable and predictable. It calls for extraordinary trust, because it involves moving out of our comfort zone.

In addition to a call, says Ortberg, there is always *fear* of one kind or another, because “God has an inextinguishable habit of asking people to do things that are scary to them.”

Third, there is always *reassurance*. God promises His presence in whatever He asks you to do. He also promises to give whatever gifts are needed to fulfill His assignments. He promises the grace we need for every situation.

Fourth, there is always a *decision*. Peter had to make a decision to get out of the boat. He didn’t know how this walking-on-water thing would turn out for him until he took the first step. The same is true for you and me. You don’t know how it will all turn out until you take the leap, or maybe just a baby-step, of faith.

Then, says Ortberg, “there is always a *changed life*. Those who say yes to God’s call don’t walk the walk perfectly – not by a long shot. But because they say yes to God, they learn and grow even from their failures. And they become part of His actions to redeem the world.”

He goes on to say that “those who say no are changed too. They become a little harder, a little more resistant to (God’s) calling, a little more likely to say no the next time. Whatever the decision, it always changes a life – and it changes the world that little life touches.”

“This pattern from Scripture,” Ortberg says, “continues today. I believe there is some aspect of your life in which God is calling you to walk with and to Him, and that when (you) say yes to His calling, it sets in motion a divine dynamic far beyond merely human power. Maybe it has to do with where you work” [or live] “or a relational risk or a gift you could develop or resources you could give. Probably” – this is the scariest part – “it will involve facing your deepest fear. Certainly it will go to the core of who you are and what you do” (Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water*, 9-10).

Is there a boat God may be calling you to get out of? What would that look like for you? Could it be that you have gotten too comfortable in your spiritual life? Or that you are content to be a spiritual consumer, enjoying the benefits of church and fellowship with others, but unwilling to step out of the comfort of your boat to take an active role in ministry? Could it be that God wants you to take a leadership role in the church, knowing it could be challenging and time-consuming? We need some of you to get out of your boat for the sake of Jesus’ name, for the health and well-being of the church, and for the church’s mission in our community and the world. We need you to get out of the boat of your comfort and contentment, instead of depending on too few to carry too much of the ministry load. Could it be that God is calling you to step up to serve?

Could it be that there is a conversation you need to have with someone, a relationship that is strained, and you’ve been putting it off?

Could it be that God wants you to be more intentional about sharing your faith and telling others about Jesus? Not just to think about doing it, but to actually do it?

Could it be that God wants you to take an active role in ministering to refugees and other internationals in our area? The world has come, and is still coming, to us.

Could it be that God is calling you to take a risk of some kind in order to serve His purposes?

Could it be that God is calling you to step out of your comfort zone to give generously, even sacrificially, to some kingdom cause?

Let me wrap up with this story. Gary Haugen is the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission (IJM), a Christian ministry dear to my heart that frees people trapped in sex trafficking and other forms of modern slavery. In his book *Just Courage*, he describes God's calling on his life to start IJM: "I vividly remember when I had to make a decision to abandon my career at the US Department of Justice to become the first employee of a not-for-profit organization that didn't yet actually exist. I had worked for three years with a friend on the idea of IJM and was very excited, in theory, about this dream of following Jesus in the work of justice in the world. But then I had to actually act. I had to walk into the DOJ and turn in my badge. I tried to be very brave and very safe. That is to say, I walked in and asked my bosses for a yearlong leave of absence. My bosses politely declined.

"I was suddenly feeling very nervous. What was I really afraid of? As I thought about it, I feared humiliation. If my little justice ministry idea didn't work, no one was going to die. If IJM turned out to be a bad idea and collapsed, my kids weren't going to starve. We'd probably just have to live with my parents for a while until I could find another job, but with my education, odds are I would soon find a job. The fact is, I would be terribly embarrassed. Having told everybody about my great idea, they would know it was a bad idea or that I was a bad leader. Either way, it would be humiliating.

"So there it was. My boundary of fear. I sensed God inviting me into an extraordinary adventure of service, but deep inside I was afraid of looking like a fool and a loser. This was actually very helpful to see, because it helped me get past it. When I am (older), do I really want to look back and say: '*Yeah, I sensed that God was calling me to lead a movement to bring rescue to people who desperately need an advocate in the world, but I was afraid of getting embarrassed and so I never even tried?*'" (Haugen, *Just Courage*, 129-130)

Gary Haugen had to decide whether to get out of the boat or not. He *did* get out of the boat, and by God's grace IJM continues to make a huge difference by standing up for the poor and the powerless around the world.

Like Peter, Gary Haugen got out of the boat. Is God calling you to get out of the boat in some way? To step out in faith, trusting Him? To take a risk in His name? Maybe, like Gary Haugen, what God is calling you to do is a big thing. Or maybe it is not such a huge

thing, but it is still big for you. Don't let your fear keep you from getting out of the boat. Because ... if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.