

Our story today picks up where we left off last Sunday. The crowd of 5,000 families has received meal and mercy and now Jesus dismisses them back to their homes. Jesus tells his disciples to get in their boat and start across the Sea of Galilee to the other side and then sets off to pray by himself.

Still reeling from his expulsion from Nazareth and the news of his cousin's death, exhausted from miracle working and healing and preaching, Jesus needs some time to himself. Soon it becomes dark, and then it is early morning. Jesus looks out across the water and sees his disciples far out from the shore, battered by a small storm. And Jesus, stepping from one miracle into another, begins his walk across the sea.

This miracle of Jesus is an important moment for Peter, and we'll talk about that in a minute; but it's also an important moment for Jesus. In the ancient world, the sea was the symbol of chaos. In Genesis 1 the poet tells us that before God creates, the world is a formless void and darkness hovers over the face of the waters; and the only one who can tame the chaotic water is God.

The sea was also a source of fear to the ancient people. A little fishing boat could be swallowed up and shattered by an oncoming storm. Large, terrifying, and unidentified creatures lurked in its depths. There were no personal floatation devices, so even if you could swim, if you capsized in the middle of the sea, you would surely drown.

And so you can understand the disciples' fear when they see Jesus walking toward them on the water. They are already petrified of the choppy sea, and this apparition approaching them on the waves must surely be some kind of ghost.

Now, Jesus is not the first person to walk on water; or at least, this is not the first story ever told about someone walking on water. The ancient Greeks had a number of stories that predate this one about people who walked the waves—but those people were almost always gods or children of the gods. Yet here is a humble rabbi, walking on the water.

As the disciples cower in their boat, Jesus reassures them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Now, "it is I," is a misleading translation. What Jesus actually says is, "Take heart; I am." That "I am" is a reference back to the Exodus story when through the burning bush God reveals God's name to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM." Jesus is echoing God's name in Exodus.

This story is important for Jesus because it shows us who Jesus really is. Jesus seems to be able to control the chaos and terror of the waters, bringing them under his submission—just like God. Jesus can walk upon the waves—just like the ancient sons of gods. Jesus announces himself as "I am"—just like God. This whole scene is one giant revelation of Jesus' identity as *God*.

And Peter, standing on the boat, takes all this in. Maybe he doesn't understand all of it, but he understands enough. He calls out: "Lord, since it is you, command me to come to you on the

water!” And so Jesus says, “Come.” Peter steps out on the waters and approaches Jesus. But remember, the waters were a terrible source of fear to ancient people and Peter is not immune. He takes his eyes off Jesus for a moment, sees the dark clouds, hears the whipping wind, feels the spray upon his cheeks, and immediately he starts to sink. Actually, he does more than sink; the Greek word here implies drowning; Peter plunges, flailing, into the water.

In that moment he cries out, “Lord! Save me!” and Jesus reaches out his arm and grabs Peter. As one commentator writes, “Indeed, the one who is able to walk on water and invite others to do so is also able to save.” Another act of divine revelation, Jesus pulls Peter out of the water and helps him back into the boat.

Once Peter and Jesus are safe between the gunwales the disciples exclaim, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Simply by walking across the waves, Jesus has shown himself in several different ways to be divine.

Now, let’s talk about Peter. Peter often gets a bad rap because of this story. We often see this as his “doubting Thomas” moment. Peter thinks he’s all that, but when his faith is put to the test, he nearly drowns. This notion of Peter as a doubter is further supported by Jesus’ apparent rebuke of Peter, calling him “You of little faith.” But what if Jesus is not actually rebuking Peter? What if Jesus is actually encouraging Peter?

First, let’s take a look at Peter’s actions in this story. He, along with the other disciples, is surrounded by a great and terrifying storm; the orderly world that God created seems to be slipping back into chaos. Then this phantom appears upon the waves and everyone dissolves into terror. But then Jesus offers reassuring words of comfort. Now Peter could act like the other disciples; he could sit cowering in the boat. But he doesn’t.

Peter addresses Jesus, saying “Lord, it is you...” Unlike the other disciples who believe Jesus to be a ghost, Peter believes that this person is Jesus. That is an act of faith!

Then Peter does the unthinkable and *commands* Jesus to do something for him. He says, “Lord, since it is you, *command* me to come to you on the water.” Peter *commands* Jesus to *command* Peter! Peter demands something of his Lord, believing that Jesus can and will do as Peter asks. That is an act of faith!

Peter looks at his Jesus standing on the water and *believes* that since his Lord is standing on the water, he can stand on the water, too. It’s not that Peter thinks he can do this himself. After all, he tells Jesus to *command* him to walk on the waves. Peter is confident that his Lord can make that happen. That is an act of faith!

Then Peter *actually* steps out of the boat! He’s not just talking. He means what he says. He says he wants to walk on the water and then he steps out of the boat and does it. That is an act of faith!

Then Peter falters. He lets the wind and the waves get to him and he drops like a rock into the water (Peter, after all, means “rock”). But even in this moment of doubt, even in this moment of drowning, what does Peter say? “Lord! Save me!” Another act of faith! Peter is drowning in the sea and who does he look to for salvation? None other than his Lord, Jesus.

Peter proves his faith half a dozen times in the span of three verses. So why is it that we get hung up on Peter’s one instance of doubt? Perhaps it is because of Jesus’ phrase “you of little faith.” So let’s take a look at that.

The word for “little faith” in Greek is *oligopistos* (ὀλιγόπιστος). “Oligo” means “little,” and “pistos” means “faith.” It shows up a few times in Matthew’s gospel. Its first appearance is in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” Here it is as though Jesus uses “you of little faith” as a term of endearment, similar to the way he calls the disciples “little ones”.

For Jesus, little faith is not necessarily a bad thing—it may not be as good as great faith, but no one in Matthew’s gospel has great faith (save for one gentile woman, an outsider, who we’ll talk about next week). Little faith is, in a way, the mark of a disciple. Jesus’ followers have little faith because they are still learning what great faith looks like. In Matthew 17, Jesus says that the disciples have little faith; but if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains. As you know, mustard seeds are *little*—the reality is that a little faith is all that it really takes.

So maybe Jesus doesn’t rebuke Peter; maybe he encourages him. After all, Peter has displayed his faith in Jesus several times: in recognizing this apparent ghost as Jesus, in commanding Jesus to command him, in stepping out onto the water, in calling out to Jesus to save him. Maybe Jesus’ “you of little faith” is an insult, a jab, a reprimand: “You should have had more faith, Peter! What’s wrong with you?”

Or maybe it’s an encouragement. Maybe when Jesus calls Peter *oligopistos*, he does it as a term of endearment. Maybe Jesus is saying, “Peter! You were doing so well! Look at this little faith you are cultivating. It’s going to grow into something magnificent. You doubted back there on the water, but you didn’t need to because you already have the beginnings of a great faith!”

To have great faith may mean that you never doubt; but few if any have that sort of faith. Little faith, which is the faith of most of us, has inevitable periods of uncertainty. There will be moments when we doubt; but if we are like Peter, those moments of doubt will be surrounded by moments of profound faithfulness. We can choose to dwell on the one moment of doubt, or we can focus on all the profound moments of faith. Little faith was enough for Peter; and Jesus shows us that little faith is enough for us, too.

The profound grace of this story is that Jesus pulls Peter up. And so Jesus reaches for us when we are drowning, too. We all have a “little faith” because we’re all still learning what it means

to be faithful—that's the life of a disciple. And so inevitably we have moments of doubt. But remember, the one who walks on the waves is also the one who saves. In those moments of doubt, our Lord is right there beside us, ready to grab us and pull us back up. The good news of Jesus is that he is gracious. He does not only offer us salvation in moments of faithfulness, but in moments of doubt as well.

Our reading today begins with a series of revelations of Jesus as God and ends with the disciples acknowledging Jesus as such. The arc of this passage is ultimately one of growing faithfulness, despite Peter's momentary doubt. When we focus in on Peter's doubt, we miss the greater message about faithfulness. As a follower of Jesus, you are a wave walker. You may have moments when you start to sink, yes—but in those moments never forget that you first walked upon the waves, and by the grace of God you will do so again.

So go, you of little faith, and walk upon the water.

Amen.