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"Walking on Water"

by Matthew Christians

based on Matthew 14:22-33
13th Sunday after Pentecost
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

So what would you do if an earthquake struck right this instant? No, wait... I said that wrong. It's not what would you *do*, it's how would you *feel*? Sitting right there, right here in this old church building that's obviously not built according to modern building codes... right here in this old church building that is just as obviously not "earthquake-proof." How would you feel if the ground started to shake?

I'll tell you what you'd feel. You'd feel the same as me. Fear. Fear is the undertow in this morning's Gospel reading. Fear threatens to swallow up Peter and the disciples in their little boat.

You know about fear? Sudden fear? Irrational fear? Paralyzing fear? Funny thing about fear... not only can it take your breath away, make your heart pound two hundred beats a minute, but fear can erode your faith, generate doubt.

To every person who has ever felt fear, to every man woman child who has ever felt the hammer of fear crushing them down, to the disciples fear, to your fear and mine, Jesus speaks His Word. It's the word recorded for us today in verse 27. Jesus says, "*Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.*"

"Take heart," He said. "*Do not fear.*" Why? Because Jesus was there. Because Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God Himself, was there. "*It is I,*" He said. And

actually, if you take a glance at the Greek text, you'll see that the phrase "It is I" literally is the phrase "ego eimi" (ἐγώ εἰμι) which means "I AM," the sacred name of God. YaHWeH. This is no ordinary guy out for a walk on the waves. He's YaHWeH in the flesh, the creative Word through whom all things were made, dancing on the Deep as though He owns it. Which, come to think of it, He does.

To appreciate fully the miracle, you need to know a bit about the Deep. In Genesis chapter one, when the earth was in its embryonic stage, darkness covered the Deep. The Deep then was chaos. Chaotic, swirling waters with the Spirit-wind of God blowing over the face of the Deep. Now fast forward to Jesus walking on the surface of the water, the Deep. It's dark; pitch black darkness. It's three o'clock in the morning and the wind is blowing over the waters. It's Genesis chapter one all over again— the Word, the water, the Spirit. It's a new creation with Jesus! It's Jesus bringing order to chaos. It's Jesus bringing promise to despair, hope to fear.

The Deep also came to represent Sheol. You know "Sheol," that word we always stumble over in the psalms? Sheol stands for Death and the Grave. Sheol is that dark, nebulous underworld which the Jews believed would swallow you up like Jonah tossed into the drink. Sailors and fishermen feared the Deep as they feared Death itself. For the Deep was filled with fearsome sea monsters— Leviathan, who would swallow you up and never spit you out again.

That is the Deep. But now, what should we make of this? Now, here is Jesus, walking on the back of those monsters! We see right away that the most fearsome monsters of the deep are little more than playthings to the Lord. In Jesus, they've met their Maker... and their match. We see that, with Jesus, there is nothing to fear.

Yet the fact remains that the disciples WERE afraid, as we all are afraid when our safety is threatened. When the Grave opens its gaping jaws, and the darkness rears its ugly head, the old fear rises up. Oh, we may not be as superstitious as they were back then, but the fears are just as real when we wait for the medical tests to come back or when we have that near miss on the highway.

Now was the sight of Jesus something that calmed their fear. The disciples thought they were seeing ghosts. The truth of it is that visions are not usually very comforting. Visions rarely bring comfort, only more fear.

So what calms the disciples' fear? What calms the disciples' fear—and our own—is Jesus' word. *"Take heart,"* He said. *"Do not fear. I AM."* Jesus speaks calm to their fear, just as His words and the sight of His wounds on Easter evening calmed their fears in the upper room. This was no ghost, no phantom in the night. It was the Lord, flesh and blood Jesus, walking on the water, coming to them to save them.

Now Peter wasn't quite so sure. Good old Peter. I'm always glad to have him around. He usually says what everyone else is thinking. He'd seen the miracles— lepers cleansed, demons exorcized, even his own mother-in-law healed by Jesus. But walking on water? This defies common sense, not to mention Archimedes' principles of buoyancy. And so He says, *"Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you in the water."*

Peter wants proof. And really, don't we all? It's hardly the way of faith, but the ever-patient, ever-teaching Jesus obliges. *"Come,"* He says to Peter. And Peter climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to Jesus.

Now how can Peter do such great things? You already know the Catechism answer. It's not Peter who does it. It's the Word of God spoken across the water from Jesus to Peter. It's the Word of God and the faith which clings to that Word. *"Come."* The Lord speaks the Word, and it is so. By the Word of Jesus, Peter shares in the miracle and dances on the Deep. Walks on the back of all that Deep represents.

Now... a brief word of caution. I wouldn't recommend trying this at home in your swimming pool, or with a river or a lake. Chances are pretty good that you'll sink. This is not one of those "what would Jesus do" moments. Jesus isn't talking to YOU here. He was speaking to Peter. Peter is the one given the word to step out of the boat and walk, not you!

Which is fine, because Jesus has a greater Word for you. Do you know it? It's the Word He spoke at your Baptism. It's the Word, combined with water, which changed

you from an outsider to an insider, from an unbeliever to one who believes. It is through the waters of Holy Baptism that you receive all the benefits of Jesus' greater miracle— His death and resurrection... forgiveness, life, salvation.

How can water do such great things? How can something so simple and so humble bring life and salvation? We're apt to dismiss these things as nothing more than religious rituals. Symbols, not the real stuff. Even some of our fellow Christians think that way, in spite of the Biblical evidence. But if Peter could walk on water by the Word of Jesus, just think of what Jesus' Word can do: forgive sins, raise the dead, create faith, make water a washing of re-creation, of re-newing. After all, He made everything with His Word. Is there anything His Word can't do?

If you ever catch yourself beginning a sentence with the phrase, "God can't..." or "Jesus couldn't..." immediately put your finger to your lips and let your mortal flesh keep silence. Don't you dare finish that sentence! That's unbelief talking. With God, nothing is impossible. A Virgin conceives. A man walks on water. Jesus dies and rises. Forgives your sin. Baptizes you. Gives you His body to eat, His blood to drink. Promises to raise you from the depths of your grave. All by the Word of His mouth. Get it? Got it? Good!

There's only one problem. Maybe you can help me out. If God, by the power of His Word, can do anything... If Jesus Christ can die and then live again... If Jesus Christ can give you His own body and blood to drink and give it for the forgiveness of your sins... If Jesus can dance on top of the waters of the deep and has the power to let others do so along with Him... why, then... why in the world does Peter start to sink?!?!?

"[Jesus] said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' "

He starts out quite, well, doesn't he? Peter. He sees Lord Jesus; he keeps his eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of his faith, and keeps His Word stuck in his ear. But you know how it goes. We have this little attention problem. Spiritual

ADD— attention deficit disorder. You start looking around, checking things out, see how your walk with the Lord on the waves is going. You begin to notice the wind and the whitecaps, not to mention your sin and all the ways you mess things up, even when you don't intend to.

And then, well... you didn't mean for it to happen! But it isn't Jesus at the center anymore; it's you! It's you at the center, which is just what the devil, the world, and your own sinful, self-centered self wants. You in the middle. And then doubt starts to creep into your mind. And fear. And in a flash you say to yourself, "Hey, wait a minute! Men can't walk on water!" And you start to drop into the Deep like a rock.

Freeze frame that scene in your mind. Peter's about to go under. His eyes wide as saucers. He catches one more breath before the waves swallow him. He cries out, "*Lord, save me!*" Got that picture of sinking Peter in your mind? You know who that is? That's you in your death. That's you being pulled under by the riptide of sin and the Law. That's you without Christ. That's you without His Word, without His body and blood, without His Baptism. All on your own, like that deeply disturbing movie "Open Water" (d'you ever see that one? Where two divers are mistakenly abandoned way out in the middle of the ocean?) Nothing but the deep blue sea and its monsters.

But then a firm hand reaches out and catches you. A hand reaches out and grabs on to you so tightly that it almost hurts, but that's all right because you know He won't let you go. Ever. It's a familiar hand, a hand that reached out and catch the whole world on a cross in the darkness of one Good Friday. That same hand that plucked Peter from the Deep will pull you from the grave when He comes like a thief in the night.

"*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*" Jesus says. "Peter, so bold, and now so frightened? Why did you doubt?" Why do we?

Do you think Jesus will fail you in your hour of need? Do you think that He who died for you, who went down to the depths to save you, will abandon you? Do you think He will turn a deaf ear to your cry for mercy?

The answer is NEVER! You, my friend, are baptized. You have His sign, His seal,

His mark. His personal testimonial that you belong to Him. You have His Body and His Blood, the sign and the seal of your salvation. You have His Word— the Word that causes men to walk on water, that makes all things new, the Word that "*will raise [you] and all the dead and give eternal life to [you] and all believers in Christ*" (Small Catechism, Creed art. 3).

Take heart. Do not fear. Jesus is with you. The great "I Am" is with you all your days until the end of the days. The hand that snatches you from the jaws of death will not let you go. Ever. Do not fear anything in this world, for nothing can break His hold on you. Not the cancers, not the bullets, the bullies, terrorists, bad government, the devils and demons, the darkness of your soul. Not even your sin. And when doubt overtakes you... when sin overwhelms you... when waves of guilt and shame wash over you and threaten to drown you, say with Peter, "*Lord, save me.*" And Jesus will. He always will.

Like He did with Peter. After Jesus reached down His hand to Peter, together they climbed into the boat to join the others. The wind died down. There was peace in that little boat.

And the rest of the story? Peter didn't admire his hand and say, "I sure had a good grip on you, Lord, didn't I?" Nor did he didn't boast about his little walk with the Lord on the water. He and the rest of the disciples did the only thing you they could— the only thing that's left to do when Jesus has done it all— they worshiped and confessed Him, saying "*Truly you are the Son of God.*"

That's a picture of you and me here this morning. Yanked from the Deep by the strong hand of Jesus. Made new by water and the Spirit, washed with water and the Word. Huddled together in a little congregation adrift on the high stormy seas of a shifting culture. But you know what? We couldn't be safer. Jesus is with us. Welcome aboard! In Jesus' name, Amen.

May the peace of God –which surpasses understanding– guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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