Matthew 14:22-33

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,\* for the wind was against them.25And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake.26But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

28 Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’29He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus.30But when he noticed the strong wind,\* he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.33And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’

Peter Gets His Feet Wet

Peter has gotten a lot of grief for this incident. Some have noted that Peter does what Pilate and Herod and (yes, even) Satan did by questioning Jesus identity; “Lord, if it is you…” Some accuse Peter of being a show off, of wanting to walk on water, *just like Jesus does.* And of course he’s criticized for looking down at the waves, losing his faith, and having to call out to Jesus to save him.

But I would like to commend Peter this morning. I believe Peter’s words and actions have an important lesson for us on our coming to faith in Christ. I believe that if we’re honest with ourselves we will see that rather than showing a lack of faith, or weak faith in this episode, Peter exhibits a faith that should be respected and emulated.

Let’s remember the context of this story: It’s been a long day for Jesus and the disciples. They go by boat to a deserted place only to find over five thousand people have followed them, so Jesus spends the day healing the sick, as evening approaches, he has dinner with them, then he dismisses the crowd and tells the disciples to take the boat to the other side of the lake (sea!) while he finally gets some private prayer time up on the mountain. Now it’s the middle of the night, and the disciples are fighting the wind and the waves on the sea, no doubt exhausted and afraid that they might not make it. And what they see coming toward them in the middle of the sea is not a comforting sight. It looks like Jesus, but how could it be him? Whoever…*what*ever it is, it’s walking on the water. The disciples think he’s a ghost. Think of it: you’re tired, physically exhausted, afraid you’re going to drown, and you see something walking toward you on the sea. Jesus says to them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” I have a sneaky suspicion that those words did little to allay the fears of the disciples; I’ve never seen someone walk on water, but if I did, on a sea, in the middle of the night, and that person spoke to me, *I* would think it was a ghost. I’ve never seen a ghost, but it seems that the most logical explanation I could muster would be *this is a ghost.* At any rate, the writer does *not* say that the disciples were suddenly relieved, that they believed it was Jesus and all their worries disappeared: “Oh, thank God it’s you, Jesus. We were really scared what with the wind and the waves and all. So glad you came to join us.” No, if anything, seeing Jesus walking across the water on a stormy sea in the middle of the night would have terrified them even more.

And Peter is the first to speak. Remember that Peter was the disciple that Jesus commissioned to be in charge after he ascended. Peter, who’s so often criticized for his lack of faith, was actually the disciple who exhibited the most faith, and consequently the most initiative. He was a natural leader. He felt the fear and the panic of the disciples on this little craft in the middle of this stormy sea in the middle of this dark night, and he knew he had to lead. So he was the first to open his mouth.

And note what he says: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He could have told the disciples to turn the other way and do their best to get away from this specter. He could have simply asked Jesus to come and rescue them. But something about that moment caused Peter to take another tack. Notice something else that Peter did not do: he did not just jump out of the boat and walk over to Jesus. Peter said, “Lord, *if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”* In this one sentence, he expresses doubt, faith, and an understanding of the relationship he should have with Jesus. *“If”* it is you. Peter’s not certain that what he sees is Jesus. It could be a ghost. But if it *is* Jesus, Peter knows that his job as a disciple is to obey him, and so he says, “command me.” Finally, an expression of faith: if this is really Jesus, Peter believes that Jesus will make it possible for him to walk to him over the raging sea. The last time the disciples were on a stormy sea, Jesus was in the boat with them, and when he calmed the stormy sea, the disciples asked, “what manner of *man* is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?” They were amazed, but Jesus was still a mere man in their eyes. But now Peter is seeing something far greater in Jesus. *If* this is Jesus, I will obey his orders, and I will trust him completely, and I will show my faith by obeying him in this unusual order. We know in the military that we are required as soldiers to follow all lawful orders given to us by our superiors. Peter believes that if Jesus commands something, as absurd and impossible as it may seem, it is nonetheless a lawful order that must be obeyed. If this is Jesus, any order is a lawful order. And because Jesus is not just another person, Peter will succeed in carrying out that order. He trusts his commander. He has faith. Furthermore he knows that the other disciples need to have some assurance, and so he’s willing to put his neck out to build their faith.

Now his question is a bit problematic. Because what if this is *not* Jesus he sees? Is the ghost going to comply with Peter’s request and think, “Well I’m not Jesus, so I should not command Peter to come.” Would a ghost be that honest, that ethical? It seems that I remember an awful lot of ghost stories where the ghost beckons some poor fool over a cliff or into the raging sea. So if you think about it, Jesus’ response to Peter, “Come,” gave Peter no real assurance that it was Jesus. *Which means that Peter had to make a decision: Do I believe that this is Jesus?*

And you could bet that the rest of the disciples were watching to see what Peter would do.

So often in life we are faced with the same decision. We seek to know God, and we want to trust him, but we just aren’t sure if it’s Jesus we hear or someone else, or our imagination.

And we all have doubt like Peter. When we seriously start to fret about the circumstances around us – the economy, the stock market, the crime rate, and a million other concerns – we can easily start to sink. But we’re reminded that ultimately we can’t make it on our own. We need to call out to Jesus when we get in trouble.

And what if we could trust in Jesus enough to know that if we come to him, however challenging and dangerous things may appear, that he will keep our heads above water? And that even if we lose our nerve, lose our focus, we can shout out, “Save me, Lord” and trust that Jesus will be there?