

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>23</sup> After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

*<sup>25</sup> Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. <sup>26</sup> When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.*

*<sup>27</sup> But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

*<sup>28</sup> "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."*

*<sup>29</sup> "Come," he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

*<sup>31</sup> Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"*

*<sup>32</sup> And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. <sup>33</sup> Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:22-33 NIV2011)*

### **Focus Your Eyes of Faith**

In a world of cell-phone dinging and feeling the need for schedule filling, it's not too difficult to be distracted. Some people are really good about blocking out the background noise of life and can focus on the task at hand. Others not so much. And as much as we would like to think we can multi-task, science shows our brains do not work that way. Instead it's more like a ping pong match bouncing from one task to the next so we aren't really focused on either one. No, distractions are quite prevalent. But you don't need me to tell you that. You feel it in your faith life too. You sit down to pray and your mind bounces to what's for supper tonight. As you think you are reading your devotion you start reading the to-do list written on your brain that you don't want to forget. You're here in church hearing my voice you while also hearing the voice of so many things needing your attention today, tomorrow, this next week. It's hard to stay focused. But especially when it comes to your faith life, this is a serious matter. In Matthew 14 we see what happens when eyes of faith wander and lose focus.

It had already been quite the busy day. They had just finished picking up twelve baskets of left-overs after Jesus fed the 5000. And, as evening comes along, Jesus tells them to go ahead, get in the boat, and cross the Sea of Galilee. He would catch up later. Jesus had been pushing this off all day because the needs of the people were top priority. But, in the end, he too needs to rest. He needs some alone time with His Father in heaven in prayer.

And so the disciples head out leaving Jesus alone. But along the way severe winds pick up beating up the boat and the disciples in it. Normally it wasn't blowing this way. But today of all days, after the long day they already had, the wind was not doing them any favors. You could feel the frustration and anxiety in the boat. I'm sure more than one voice cried out telling the wind what they thought of it. Is this ever going to end? Will they ever reach the other side?

And then they see it. How could it be? It's not possible. It sure looks a lot like Jesus. But he's not in a boat or on a small raft. He's walking on the same water the wind is tossing about in great waves. You know as well I do that's not possible. So how could this be? "It's a ghost!" That's the most logical explanation for them. A visible spirit makes more sense to them than the alternative. Really tells how terrifying this all is: they would rather believe a ghost than Jesus actually being able to walk on water.

To a point, you know what the disciples are struggling with in that boat. It's hard to make sense of things when the winds of trouble beat against you. It's difficult to focus clearly when you feel like you are fighting against the tides of life. Sometimes it starts right of way in the morning and it feels like everything is going against you. You just want the day to be done so you can go back to bed and start over tomorrow. Other times all it takes is a few minute conversation that whips us around and leaves us feeling beat up and exhausted. For others, that's what your life has felt like: plowing through the winds of struggle that keep blowing and won't stop. Like the disciples we can be quick to cry out in fear. It doesn't always take too much to call out, "Unfair," to God when it doesn't stop. The promises of God seem so unbelievable. It can be hard to focus on the truth and consider it pure joy facing trials. It's hard to make sense that it's possible that God's guiding hand is right there, even in the struggle, working things for your good. It's hard to accept the truth that God uses the troubles to refine us to get rid of those things that do distract us or that we are holding onto instead of him.

And, yet, even when they didn't recognize him, Jesus comes to them. "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid," Jesus says. And the spoken Word is all it takes.

Jesus says to you, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid. No matter how hard the winds of struggle blow or long it lasts, I Am the Lord of all things. I'm not wishful thinking; a mere ghost of an idea. I am with you. Do not be afraid." And faith hears the word, focuses on Jesus, and believes.

Peter responds, "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Is this boldness? Is this a strong faith? Is this simply Peter being compulsive? Is he challenging Jesus' authority? We are not told exactly. But we are told Jesus says, "Come." And so Peter quickly follows out of the boat and, lo and behold, he too is walking on the water. This isn't you walking on the lake ice fishing. This is feet touching wet water. And he's not

sinking. He walks toward Jesus. What power that not only keeps Jesus afloat but now he grants to another person as well!

But Peter can't help but see it. The wind is still howling. The waves are still tossing. And where there was once faith, doubt comes crashing in. "What am I doing out here? How did I ever think this was possible? What am I going to do if that wave crashes into me? What if Jesus changes his mind while I'm out here? Maybe I need to walk a little faster, do something more, then I'll be safe!" With fear gripping Peter's heart, doubt pulls Peter down, and he begins to sink. Because doubting is not believing. Doubt cuts off the lifeline that keeps us afloat. Human beings on their own cannot hope to walk on water.

Sometimes like Peter we are bold. We hear the Word of God spoken into ears and onto our hearts and we feel like we can take on the world. We trust that once we take that step outside of the church doors we are ready to do what God has called us to do. And we can, as long as our eyes stay focused on Christ.

But then we see the waves of the world and behind faith doubt quickly rushes in threatening to drown us. It's so easy to become budget focused—eyes focused on the dollars coming in and the dollars going out—instead of ministry focused—eyes of faith trusting God's promises and sharing Jesus' Word. The waves of financial instability look so large and threatening for the church and for your life. There's the wave of this pandemic that we can't tell which way it's going to go and how it's going to turn out—it's so easy to let fear wash over us and pull us down. There's the wave of sickness and reoccurring pain that won't go away and just makes life miserable. There's the wave of relationships that sometimes are looking good and safe and the next and then it comes crashing down with more problems and heartache. And if that's not tough enough there's the wave of loneliness and thoughts of being forgotten not giving you time to breathe. The stress of life, the things you want to get done, the things other people want you to do toss you about. Then there's not seeing any results threaten to drown out a desire to keep doing what God calls you to do. If that's not enough, there's the constant waves of temptation and pet sins that keep crashing down.

As long as our eyes of faith remain focused on Jesus, his authority, his control over all things, we can stay afloat. But too often, like Peter, our eyes wander and those waves of trouble loom so large that we begin to doubt. What if this time you have to do it on your own? Maybe I need to do something extraordinary, go-above-and-beyond, to get God's attention! What if it is only you who can fix this problem? Maybe God's attitude has changed. Maybe this time the problem is too great. Maybe this time God won't forgive me. Maybe Jesus is going to leave me and not care. And where once there was faith, now there is doubt. And doubting is not believing but cuts you off from the lifeline that is Jesus.

And, yet, in spite of our doubt, Jesus does not abandon his people to drown. That little faith cries out from Peter's mouth: "Lord, save me!" And that's what Jesus does because that's what Jesus came to do. And Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" He's not shaming Peter but telling him: there was no reason for you to do it. He wasn't going to let him go.

Oh you of little faith, Jesus says to you and me when we are so focused on the great big waves of trouble and the howling winds of struggle. Why did you doubt? Here's your compassionate Savior who cares for his people. He's not there shaming you when you have doubted. Instead he reaches out, grabs on, and pulls you up from drowning under it all. He has no intention of letting you go. Why do you doubt? He's the all-powerful God who controls the winds and the waves. Even the so-called laws of nature abide to his own laws and serve his purpose as he walks on water. Why did you doubt? Remember what he has already done for you. His perfect life and innocent death has already been accomplished. His precious blood shed already paid your sin debt. Your sins—including your doubt—is already forgiven. His suffering brings you peace with God. He's gone to hell and back for you rising from the grave. Why did you doubt? He's not a far-off God making sure to keep his social-distance. He reaches through time and space to touch you in the waters of baptism and to pull you out of those waters of death to a new life with him. He reaches out and touches your hands and your lips in the Lord's Supper in the bread and wine with his body and blood pulling you up with his forgiveness again. Our reason cannot make sense of it. But faith focused on Jesus sees clearly. It believes that I'm not God, Jesus is so I don't need to be afraid. Without a doubt I'm not God, Jesus is the one with authority who rules over all creation and still controls all things. Take courage, I'm not God, the one who has authority over the devil whose head he crushed and over the grave he defeats with his resurrection, Jesus, he is.

Fall before Jesus, as the disciples do, and confess, "Truly you are the Son of God." Focus your eyes of faith when troubles and struggles inevitably come, fall down before Jesus and call out to him who saves; He always will. It's not too late. Focus on Jesus who takes time to be with his Father in heaven in word and prayer. Especially in crazy busy times take time to get away for a few minutes to be with him to refocus those eyes of faith. Truly he is the Son of God. Focus your eyes of faith on him. Amen.