

“Faith is More Than Knowing Where the Rocks Are”

Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 14:22-33

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The stories in today’s scriptures remind me of two others. In the first, a child comes home from Sunday School after hearing the story of the miraculous escape through the Red Sea. “What did you learn today, darling?” asked the parents. “Well,” said the child, “the Egyptians used AWAC’s and Russian BTR-82 armored personnel carriers and T-90 tanks to chase the Israelites, who had no air cover and were being transported in HUMVEEs, except for one semi-trailer. When they got to the Red Sea, Moses deployed the semi-trailer and a pontoon bridge unfolded on which the Israelite-filled HUMVEE’s crossed while Moses held his hands up to create a magnetic force-field to keep the AWACs away. When the HUMVEE’s had all crossed and the BTR-82’s and T-90’s were on the bridge, Moses dropped his hands and from out of nowhere came Israeli F-16’s that destroyed that bridge with the Egyptian Army on it. So the Israelites escaped.”

The child’s incredulous parents asked “Really?!? Is that what they told you?” “No, but if I told you what they said, you’d never believe it!”

In the second story Moses and Jesus got into a bragging context in heaven. Moses said, “I fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness.” Jesus said, “I made five loaves and two fishes feed 5,000 men, plus women and children.” Moses said, “I struck a rock and water came out.” Jesus said, “I turned water into wine.” Moses said, “I raised my hands and parted the Red Sea.” Jesus said, “I walked on water.”

“No!” Moses said. “I don’t believe it.” “I’ll show you,” Jesus replied, and sweeps them away to the Sea of Galilee and does it. Moses, not to be outdone, steps out on the water only to sink like a stone. Peter, who has been with them all the time watching these things, leans over and whispers, “Lord, are you going to tell him you know where the rocks are?”

As long as we are fascinated only with the miracles we miss the real power, to our loss. For faith is more than knowing where the rocks are. Faith is more than some slight of hand or suspension of natural law. Faith is trust: trust in God, trust in Christ, to provide for our needs and to give us power to grab hold of life with authority.

Surely this story of Peter is our own. We have said, or heard others say “I feel like I’m drowning.” Perhaps the cramp of a painful relationship stops us dead in the water. Or we feel buoyant until some lead-like sorrow drags us under. Or we feel like we’re treading water; or caught in the under-tow; or crushed by the breakers. That’s how it is sometimes and that’s how it was with Peter and the disciples: caught in the sea with the wind and waves crashing against their boat.

But then four things happened. In baseball we get three outs in an inning, but today you get four “outs” in a sermon. If you don’t remember anything else, remember these four “outs” of Peter. Peter **looked** out. He **stepped** out. He **reached** out. And he got **pulled** out.

First, Peter **looked** out. He saw Christ. Granted, they were confused and thought Christ was a ghost. But in the act of looking Christ made eye contact. Faith is looking out to see that it’s Christmas in August. That Emmanu-el, “God with us,” is not just for **Christmas** Day but for **every** day and every circumstance, including the storm. This is one of the hardest things for mature faith to learn: that faith does not protect us from the storm, but affirms that Christ is with us in it.

Second, Peter **stepped** out. To see that God is with us, as important as it is as a foundation, is not enough. It is like trying to live in a house that is only a foundation. The evidence of faith is action, when we dare to step out. It is not only belief of the brain nor even of the heart; but a willingness, as Peter did, to get our feet wet. Whatever else might be said of Peter, he stepped out. We are stepping out as a church on a major building project to be presented August 24th after worship. We have already stepped out as a church in many other areas of ministry. How are we stepping out as individuals: righting wrongs, asking forgiveness, offering forgiveness?

Third, Peter **reached** out. His willingness to step out in faith is laudable but his faith was limited. Just like ours. He sinks because of a contradiction: he recognizes Christ's Lordship (and so has stepped out) but he is afraid. Just like us. He, and we, are like Linus in the "Peanuts" cartoon strip, running across the beach shouting to Charlie Brown: "I can swim! I can swim!" "That's great, Linus," says Charlie Brown. "I can swim in the ocean" exults Linus, "and if I'm ever aboard an ocean liner...and it sinks...four feet from shore, I won't have a thing to worry about." Just like us.

We may have stepped out in faith but we know the limitations of the accomplishment. So Peter is limited and sinks. He becomes fearful in the face of fearful circumstances. Is that bad news? I don't believe so. Peter calls out, "Lord, save me." Had Peter followed perfectly, walking across the water at the Master's direction, we would have said, "Gee, wasn't Peter great. Too bad that's not me." With Peter sinking I know that's me and the Good News is we can reach out and God's love is there, NOT because we're perfect but precisely because we're not.

Finally, Peter got **pulled** out. We look out, we reach out, we step out but it is Christ who pulls us out. One of the hardest things to do is to admit our powerlessness. To admit we are at our wit's end. That there is nothing else in our bag of tricks. That we need help.

It is at that point that we are ready to be pulled out: by Christ, by dependence on others, by the support of the loving community we call the church. Ironically, admitting powerlessness is a way of re-gaining power and control through confessing our dependence on what the 12-step programs call a "higher power." All of these programs—Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, among many others—have these as the first two steps. In the case of AA, the wording of these steps is "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable" and "We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." (1)

(1) Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1988, pages 21 and 25.

Think of a drowning person, just as Peter was (or feared being). As long as they are struggling they remain frantic. When they relax they begin to buoy up. And it cannot be a single person alone who saves them, for most drowning victims are so panicked that they will drag down another person in an attempt to climb up to get the air they need.

Rescuers know that the best method is to pull the drowning victim out, either using a tool or life-ring onto which they can grab. This is what Christ does for us: he stays grounded and pulls us out and then gets into the boat with us. He is not so lofty and far away, but in our midst.

What's the time-line on this? In the story, it was quick. It had to be if Peter was not to drown in the water. Other kinds of drowning take longer to develop and longer to solve. As the grandmother, "Abuela" says in the musical "In the Heights": "Paciencia y Fe," patience and faith.

So have faith by looking out to Christ, stepping out in obedience, reaching out in times of distress and knowing we will be pulled out by the One who loves us.