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Series: Wandering Hearts: Figuring Out Faith with Peter

Sermon Title: Jesus Rescues

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Text: [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

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We are in the season of Lent that will lead us to Easter. Throughout this season and this sermon series, we are following the most famous, and the most outspoken, of the disciples—Peter—as he tries to figure out his faith. Peter was originally named Simon, and Jesus changed his name to Peter. Peter means “rock.” He was a fisherman and was the brother of Andrew, and we learned last week that Peter was among the first disciples called by Jesus and was frequently their spokesperson.

Today’s reading begins with an important word: Immediately. “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds” (Matthew 14:25). Immediately after what? Well, immediately after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. After everyone ate their fill and the leftovers were collected, immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. No time to celebrate this miracle or to relax and enjoy what just happened. Immediately they are sent across the Sea of Galilee.

We usually think of the word “immediately” as a word Mark likes to use. Mark uses the word 41 times in his gospel and Matthew uses it only five times, and three of those five times are right here in our passage today.¹ This story is found in Mark and John as well. Immediately is a word that gets our attention and is a part of life—for better or worse. A lot of the big changes in our life, good or bad, happen immediately.

It can be a good thing—when you learn that you got into the top choice for college or when you learn that you are pregnant or when a family member calls you with exciting news. These are life-changing events, often, and even though they are positive, they happen immediately. And immediately, our life is changed. There can also be unwelcome events, of course, that happen immediately—like an illness or accident or death. Or think back to the beginning of the pandemic. One week we were meeting. And then, almost immediately, we were scrambling, figuring out how to worship online. Life often happens that way.

¹ By the Numbers: “Immediately” in the Gospel of Mark by Kevin Davis, September 3, 2021, <https://www.lwch.org/>

In the case of the disciples in this gospel reading, the change they experienced was at the command of Jesus, but that doesn't make it any easier. They are asked to leave Jesus right after he has performed this feeding miracle. And when they do, they find themselves, almost immediately, on a boat being battered by the waves, far from land, with the wind against them. And we know the feeling. We have all been caught in one of life's storms. We all get our turn in this particular boat, usually when we least expect it. None of us gets through this life completely unscathed. We talked about this when we looked at miracles not long ago.

Very often these storms come at us without warning. When they do, it is worth remembering this story, and very much worth remembering the two other times that the word "immediately" shows up in this story, both of which teach us something important about our Christian journey and how to navigate the storms.

The next time that the word "immediately" occurs is when Jesus is walking on the water to his disciples. It is a famous part of this story that even people who are not familiar with the Bible have heard about—Jesus walking on the water. They are caught in this terrifying storm, and Jesus doesn't want them to be alone. So, he walks out to them. It's a simple but important detail that this story teaches us. Whenever we are caught in one of life's storms, we can trust that we are not alone even when it seems like it.

Jesus is with us. We are never alone in that boat. That is his promise. He may not immediately calm every storm, but he is with us in the midst of every single one of them. This is a different story from when Jesus was asleep in the boat while the storm was roaring. There they knew Jesus was with them. Here, they didn't know and still Jesus is there even when they didn't realize it.

The disciples, though, are not immediately comforted by seeing Jesus walking on the water to them. In fact, they are terrified, thinking that they are seeing a ghost. And so, they cry out in fear. And that is exactly when the word "immediately" shows up again. "But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid'" (Matthew 14:27).

Most versions of the Bible do what ours did and translate Jesus' words into "It is I" or "I am here" or even, "It's me!" But the Greek says only: "I am." Here, and elsewhere in the gospels, this simple designation powerfully connects Jesus to the Yahweh of Israel. When Moses asks God in the burning bush for his name, God says that his name is "I Am." Here Jesus connects himself to this very same God. Jesus is God, and that's why his presence gives us cause to take courage and, in turn, to not be afraid.

But that is not the end of the story because now enters our favorite disciple, Peter. In response to seeing Jesus walking on the water, Peter makes a strange request. "Lord," he says, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus obliges, saying simply: "Come." Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus! And Peter seems to do this very well, until he notices the storm. Then he becomes frightened and begins to sink.

He looks at the storm all around him, at the wind above him, at the water below him, and he becomes frightened and starts to sink. Perhaps you've had those moments. Times when you've taken your eyes off Jesus. Times when you looked around at the storms in your life and started to doubt—started to think that the storms are bigger than your faith can handle. We get one more use of the word "immediately" in this story. Peter, in a panic, cries out: "Lord, save me!" And Jesus does. "Jesus immediately reached out

his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:31). He immediately reaches out his hand and catches Peter the moment he cries out to Jesus.

This is important because sometimes, when we are in one of those storms and forget our faith, we can feel a little guilty, and our guilt can sometimes keep us from crying out to God for help. Jesus wants us to cry out for help whenever we need it, regardless of how faithful or unfaithful we have been lately. It is only after he catches Peter that he says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

It's only week two of this series, so I don't want to be too hard on Peter yet. It would be easy to say, be like Peter in his courage to get out of the boat, but don't be like Peter in his doubt. We might see the moral of the story as "you should have so much faith that you can walk on water toward Jesus," but the truth of this story is that Jesus walks toward us. The truth of the story is that my abundance of faith or lack of faith does not deter God from drawing close. It's that if you are scared to death, you can say Lord Save Me and the hand of God will find you in even the darkest waters because this is a story not of morals but of movement, not of heroes of the faith making their way to Christ but of Christ drawing near to you in the midst of fear.

And that is Good News. Jesus remains with us. Whether or not Peter succeeded in imitating his master's neat trick neither adds nor subtracts from the core revelation that whether we stay in the boat with the 11 disciples or hop out of the boat with the 1 disciple, Jesus is with us. He's with those of us who stay in the boat and will calm the storm that threatens. He's with those who try some grandstand move and fail, forgiving the failure and, again, calming the storm that tempted Peter to do something miraculous. Jesus' presence and power are the key to this story, not whether we are bold and courageous and impressive.

In fact, I'm not sure Jesus wants us to walk on water. I get it, "walking on water" is about courage, faith, and boldness. Indeed, this phrase has come to mean something like this in even non-Christian settings. Motivational speakers use the image of walking on water as the goal to which businesses and individual workers should aspire. "Walk on water" is on a par with other adages like, "The early bird gets the worm," "Grab the tiger by its tail," "Think outside the box" (or the boat in this case), or "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

But, like Peter, that usually is a short-term fix and we feel worse when we fail. I'm not saying that your faith should not be characterized by courage, zeal, and a firm resolve to stay true to Christ in all situations. Gaining the ability to trust Jesus fully is certainly something to which we all should aspire. But if there is a point to this story for me, it's that they end up naming Jesus as the Son of God right then and there.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way: "If there is a miracle worth savoring in this story, then it's maybe not that Jesus could walk on water (after all, if Jesus is God, then his ability to walk on water is no more surprising than your or my ability to walk up a flight of steps). And the miracle is not that Peter managed that same trick for a moment or two. No, the miracle is that when it was all said and done—while a soggy and chagrined Peter sputtered seawater out of his lungs and as the boat continued to bob around in the dead of that rather dark night—somehow in the midst of those humble surroundings way out there in the middle of nowhere, the disciples realized that no one less than God's own Son was sitting right in front of them. So they worshiped him. They believed."² That's how the story ends. "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (Matthew 14:33).

² Barbara Brown Taylor quote found at: <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-08-07/matthew-1422-33/>

Today's story is a simple story, really, if you don't get caught up in how it happened. But this story is one that I think we all need to hear right now because it reminds us of this simple, glorious truth: Jesus is with us in the midst of the storms. We can prepare for some of life's storms. They don't all hit immediately and unexpectedly. Some are more like hurricanes than tornadoes. But many of the storms of life hit immediately. And when they do, it is good to remember this story. It is good to remember that whenever we cry out to God, God reminds of the promise that God is with us. And when we take our eyes off of Jesus and become overwhelmed by what is happening in our life, it is once again good to remember that Jesus will be right there to catch us.

It is no wonder that when all of this was said and done, those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." That is why we worship, isn't it? To take a moment in the midst of our journey through life, to gather on this little boat called church, and to worship the one who promises to be with us through every storm.

"Take heart! I am! Do not be afraid!" Those were Jesus' words to them and to us. Much like "Believe" over Ted Lasso's doorway, commentator Dale Bruner notes that this is something that could well become the inscription over the doorway to every church in the world.³ Jesus' call for courage and his command not to be afraid are both rooted in the second thing he said: "I am!"

The gospel is at its root a rescue story. And we cannot save ourselves. Perhaps it's not about what we can do, but it's about what Jesus has already done. Peter calls out to Jesus to rescue him, and Jesus is there, reaching out his hand. Jesus Rescues. Jesus Saves...time and time again. "Take heart! I am! Do not be afraid!"

³ Ibid.