

Title: Asking Jesus: Doubt

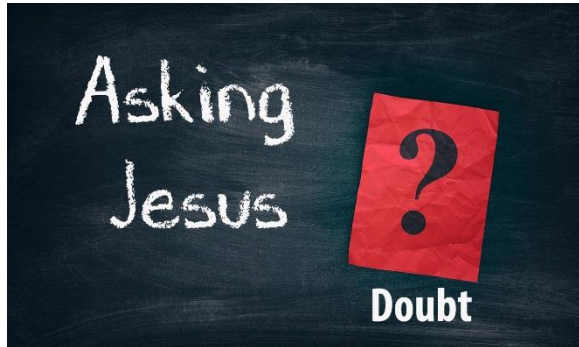
Date: March 18 & 19 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Mark 4:35-41](#)

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

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Let's start with the question before we talk about the questions. Today's question is "Why are you afraid?" (Mark 4:40) That's not my question. It's Jesus' question. There is a second question today. "Why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31) These are similar questions that are asked in similar circumstances. But before we get to the

two questions that Jesus asks, let's talk about the questions.

This is the third week of a series of sermons about the questions of Jesus. Jesus asks far more questions than he answers. In the four gospels, Jesus asks 307 questions. By contrast, he is only asked 183 questions.¹ Jesus should be nicknamed "asking Jesus."

When Jesus asks questions, it isn't that he wants information or is looking for an answer. Rather, he is holding up a mirror for self-reflection and understanding. The first question Jesus asks in several different ways. "Why are you searching for me?" What are you looking for? What do you want me to do for you?" All are good questions to begin a relationship. Jesus knows we are looking for someone to help us live meaningful lives, to connect with our deepest questions about why we are here and where we are going. Jesus is the starting place and his question is an invitation to come and see.

The next step is identity and it comes with the question, "Who do you say I am?" At first, it feels as if this question is about who Jesus is. But Jesus asks questions for our sake, not his. This question isn't a true/false question with a 50% change of getting right. This question is an essay which takes a life time to write because answering the question about Jesus' identity changes your identity, changes who you are.

Invitation, identity and now, the theme is doubt. Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt? Both of these are questions about faith. And both of these

questions take place in the same setting in similar circumstances, a small boat being tossed about in a fierce windstorm on the Sea of Galilee.

Storms are not unusual on the Sea of Galilee. Located 680 feet below sea level, it is surrounded by the Golan Heights which can reach 2,000 feet. The heights contribute cool dry air whereas the sea is semi-tropical, producing warm humid air. Bring these two factors together and you have a perfect recipe for severe weather. We will be reminded of this all week as today is the start of severe weather preparedness in Indiana.

The lake is relatively small, just 13 miles long by 8 miles wide. Think long and narrow. In 1986, a first century fishing boat similar to the one in our stories was discovered during a drought, on the northwest shore. Think longer and narrower. It is 27 feet long and 7.5 feet wide. This is the lake and boat, our setting for stories about faith and doubt.

The first story is from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It comes at the end of a long day of teaching. The crowds were so great that Jesus had to get in a boat, drift off from the shore line to teach. Then, as evening comes, Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd, they took him with them, just as he was, in the boat." (Mark 4:35-36a) After his long day, Jesus lays down on a cushion in the stern of the boat and falls asleep.

Some people are light sleepers. The least little sound can wake them up. Others sleep deeply. Nothing can wake them. I suppose that you could accuse Jesus of the later because "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." (Mark 4:37) Though the boat was tossed about as if it were a toy, Jesus remains asleep. Even the howling wind doesn't wake Jesus.

It must have been a storm like they'd never seen because they were terrified. Remember, at least five of the disciples were fishermen, seasoned sailors use to the sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee. But this storm was big, different. Afraid, they panic, wake Jesus and shout, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38)

Jesus isn't sympathetic with their fear. First rebukes the wind saying, "Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." (Mark 4:39b) And then, in the dead calm, he asks "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40) Jesus almost sounds indignant; it seems harsh given the circumstances. "Why are you afraid?" Where is your faith? Well Jesus, where did I leave it. I must have left it somewhere, maybe on the

seashore. Maybe it fell overboard. Seriously? My faith was being tossed around by a violent storm that was threatening to sink us.

Jesus, who they'd just called teacher and who had taught the entire day, is teaching with his questions. Remember, questions are designed to help people think. He wants the disciples to connect the two questions. Fear and faith are connected. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40) Faith is the answer to fear. Faith is always the answer to our fears, regardless of what our fears are about, irrespective of what storm is making us afraid. Whether they realize this or not, they who were being blown away by the windstorm are now blown away by what Jesus has done, calming the storm. They ask their own question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41)

This is the first boat story about faith, fear and doubt. The second comes late in his ministry but the questions of Jesus are largely the same. It happens again in a similar manner except that Jesus doesn't start off in the boat. Picture again this fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. See the wind pick up, the waves grow and like the previous crossing, imagine the darkness surrounding them. It is night, somewhere between 3 and 6 in the morning. Once again, the boat was battered by the waves, literally tormented. Cold, wet, exhausted, afraid, it is a déjà vu' experience but this time, they can't shout to Jesus in the boat. He isn't there; he's on the mountain praying.

As terrifying as the storm was, it gets worse when through the mist they see a figure walking on water. They think "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:26c-27) Remember, they learned the first time around that fear and faith are connected. Jesus says, "Have no fear. It's me. Don't doubt it. You can trust me. Remember, we've done this before. We can do it again. . You have this storm; you have me. Recognize which is more powerful."

Peter answer him. "All right, Lord. If it's really you, bid me come. Jesus says, "All right, Peter, get out of the boat." He said, "Come." Then an amazing thing happens.

Peter lifts one leg over the side. He puts his foot on the water, and then he lifts his other leg over the side of the boat and puts that foot on the water. And then he lets go. He is still standing, and he turns and takes a step toward Jesus. Then he takes another step, and for the first time in the history of the human race, an ordinary, mortal man is walking on the water. And for just a moment, it's just Peter and Jesus. ²

Then, all of a sudden, Peter realizes what he is doing; he sees the waves; he feels the sting of the water. And his faith gives way; he is afraid again, and he begins to sink. I picture Peter like a young boy on his first bike ride without training wheels. He rides along just fine until he thinks, "I can't be doing this!" After that moment of panic he cannot help but wobble to a slow and awkward fall by the side of the road.³ When Peter begins to sink and he cries out, "Lord, save me!" (Matthew 14:31b) Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus asks another exasperating question.

Do you think Jesus asks this question because he thought Peter failed? Do you think Peter failed? If Peter failed, at the very least it radically defines failure in the life of a follower of Christ. Failure is not event. It is the way we interpret or judge an event. It is a label we attach to it.

Jonas Salk attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines for polio before he came up with one that worked. Somebody asked, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to invent a vaccine for polio?" This was his response: "I never failed 200 times at anything in my life. My family taught me never to use that word. I simply discovered 200 ways how not to make a vaccine for polio."

Somebody asked Winston Churchill, "What most prepared you to lead Great Britain through World War II?" For a period of time, Great Britain stood virtually alone against Nazi Germany as it dominated the Western World. This was Churchill's response: "It was the time I repeated a class in grade school." The questioner said, "You mean you flunked a grade?" Churchill said, "I never flunked in my life. I was given a second opportunity to get it right."

Did Peter fail? Well, yes, in one sense. His faith gave way. He gave in to doubt, embraced fear and sank. He failed. But there were eleven bigger failures in the boat. They failed privately. They failed quietly. Their failure was safe, unnoticed, uncriticized. Only Peter experienced the sting of the question Jesus asks. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31) But only Peter knew the glory of walking on the water.⁴

Why are you afraid? Where is your faith? Why did you doubt? Again, these aren't questions that Jesus asks for information. Jesus asks for teaching, for self-reflection and understanding. Jesus wants the disciples and Peter to examine their own hearts

In both cases, Jesus feels as though he had earned the trust of his disciples. It is as if Jesus is saying, "After all we have been through together, after all I have taught you, after all you have observed in me, after all the deep and

abiding love I have shown you and promised you . . . after all of that, you do not trust me? Where is your faith?" We often use the words belief and faith as if they are synonymous, but they are different, and the differences matter. William Sloane Coffin puts it this way: "Faith isn't believing without proof— it's trusting without reservation."

The writer and priest named Henri Nouwen became fascinated, in the last years of his life, with a group of trapeze artists called the Flying Rodleigh's. There was something about their courage, soaring, trusting, and their dependence on one another that inspired him—like a parable for life with God. Nouwen wrote:

One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, talking about flying. He said, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump." "How does it work?" I asked. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar." "You do nothing!" I said, surprised. "Nothing," Rodleigh repeated. "The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him." ⁵

This seems to be what Jesus is pointing to in these two stories about doubt, fear and faith and this questions that in a way, are important to every Christ follower. Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt? Where is your faith? The answer ultimately is an issue about our ability to trust that God is there to catch us, to hold on and do for us what we simply can't do for ourselves.

Here is the truth about discipleship. It is something that lots of people don't like. I don't always like it myself. A commitment to following Christ doesn't mean that you will always have faith. The truth is fear will never go away. Doubt never completely disappears. There will always be storms, challenges, occasions when we are afraid. But every time we face the challenge, every time you get out of the boat, every time you experience doubt and fear but in the end, trust, you'll find faith. That's the rhythm of these two stories and the rhythm of life. It'll happen over and over again. It is how we put our doubts in perspective and embrace faith. As a result of Peter's having gotten out of the boat, and as a result of his failure, he experienced the

outstretched arms and hands of Jesus catching him. That doubt caused a boat load of people to have faith because as soon as Jesus and Peter were back in the boat, everyone worshiped Jesus saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:33)

Jesus is still looking for people to get out of the boat. If you go, you will face problems. A storm is out there. Your faith will not be perfect, and you will sink. But these two other things. When you fail—and you will fail—Jesus will be there. He will pick you up. He will not leave you alone. He will stretch out his arms and catch you. That and just maybe, every now and then, you might walk on water. ⁶

¹ Copenhaver, Martin B.. *Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Kindle Locations 185-188). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

² *A Mind-Expanding Faith*, John Ortberg, pg1 , retrieved at Preachingtoday.com

³ Copenhaver, pg. 705-712

⁴ Ortberg, pg 2.

⁵ *Writings*, Henri Nouwen, Orbis, 1998, ISBN: 1-57075-197-8

⁶ Ortberg, pg 3.