

# “HOW CAN YOU KNOW IT IS JESUS”

Matt. 14:22-33, Pentecost 9 Proper 14-A

Aug. 10, 2014

It was almost two years ago that Lisa I drove to Daytona Beach, Florida to celebrate Thanksgiving Day with my mother! Since we wouldn't be arriving there until 9 PM on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, I made reservations for us to stay on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of a hotel on the beach that first night. When we arrived, I will never forget how cold and windy it was! It was so windy that the traffic lights, suspended on wires, were blowing back and forth like balloons. Metal signs, suspended from poles, were screeching and squalling. The weather that night reminded me much more of my college days in Chicago of anything I had ever experienced in Florida.

That night, when we stepped off the elevator and entered our room, I headed straight for the sliding-glass door. I opened it and stepped out onto the balcony. And it was so exhilarating and awesome to see those huge, white, foamy waves crashing into the shore! All of a sudden the Holy Spirit called to my remembrance the words of this Gospel lesson today. I said to myself, “This must have been the kind of night that it was when those frightened, beleaguered disciples of Jesus were out there on the high sea fighting for their very lives (Matthew 14:22-33)!”

How about you, dear friend, have you ever had any experience like that out on the open waters before?

For the sake of logical progression, let me suggest to you that our Gospel lesson actually presents itself to us this morning in four major acts; like the acts of a play.

**In Act I, we see the arduous activity of Jesus' disciples out there on the sea, straining at those oars, expending every ounce of energy they have within them, fighting for their very lives.**

**In Act II, we see our Lord Jesus, by a great way of contrast, finally getting some time alone that he was so desperately seeking with his Heavenly Father upon on a mountainside in prayer.**

**In Act III, we next see Jesus walking to his fearful and panicked disciples, coming to rescue them, walking on the water!**

**In Act IV, we see Peter walking momentarily on the water, before he takes his eyes off of Jesus and begins to sink, calling out to the Master, “Save me!” which Jesus does.**

Throughout the Gospels this is nothing that we have ever witnessed Jesus doing before! At all other times, when Jesus crosses the lake, he takes a boat ride just like everyone else! When these disciples first see our Lord approaching them, somewhere between 3 AM and 6 AM in the morning, they are fearful--they **“It is a ghost!”(v. 26)** But listen carefully to St. Matthew careful choice of words that he writes down under the Spirit's inspiration next. Jesus says, *“Take heart! It is I! Don't be afraid!” (Matthew 14:27)*

Friends, please note that just before the curtain call, all the disciples, now safely in the boat and Peter with them, with the wind having now completely ceased, those in the boat worshiped the Lord Jesus saying, **“Truly, you are the Son of God!” (Matthew 14:33)** This should always be the goal for us, when we leave every worship service where the Scriptures are read, the Gospel proclaimed, and the Lord's Supper is celebrated!

But there is one thing I noticed about this Gospel lesson recently that I don't believe I have ever noticed before. There is something that happens here in the life of Peter that is so uncharacteristic of Peter that we are taken aback! You know, in so many other incidences in Peter's life—we see him only as the self-confident, self-assured Peter! He makes decisions quickly and there is very little hesitancy that we ever see Peter manifesting in his life!

Go back to **Matthew 4**, when Jesus first calls him and his brother Andrew, who were fishermen, to become his disciples. **“Immediately” Matthew says they dropped their nets, right there alongside of their boat, on seashore of the Sea of Galilee and they follow Jesus! (Matthew 4:19)**

Yes, Peter so often is the spokesman for all the disciples! On that day after Jesus fed the five thousand men in addition to many women and children with the five barley loaves and two fish, and Jesus next gave his disciples his discourse about his being the Bread of Life, the Bible tells us that **many of the people who were following Jesus up to that point, refused to believe the claim our Lord was making for himself.** *“They turned away from following him,”* we read in John 6:66. That’s when Jesus turned to the twelve, *“Do you want to go away as well?”* Simon Peter confidently says, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we know and have come to believe that you are the HOLY ONE of God!”* (John 6:68-69).

And on that first Maundy Thursday, when Jesus announces that all of the disciples will deny him, run away and flee, at the hour of his arrest, Peter disagrees with Jesus vehemently!

**Peter says to Jesus, “Though they all fall away because of you! I will never fall away!”** (Matt. 26:35)

But **notice Peter’s hesitancy** here! He really isn’t sure if that image of something he and the other disciples saw coming towards them, was really Jesus or not! They first suspect that image to be a ghost, for they never heard of anyone walking on the water before either! Then Jesus calls out in his reassuring voice: *“Do not be afraid! It is I!”*

Peter wants to believe it is Jesus, but Peter isn’t sure, so Peter calls out: *“Lord if it is you, command me come to you on the water!”* Please note that this wasn’t Jesus’ idea, this was Peter’s own idea. But Peter isn’t 100% sure!

So Jesus grants Peter his request, *“Come!”* So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and was actually making the distance shorter between him and Jesus, when—what does he do? He takes his eyes off of Jesus and looking at the size of waves, as he listens to the wind, whipping all around him! As he plunges down into the water, he cries out, *‘Lord, save me.’* This is when Jesus stretches out his hand and rescues him.

In Psalm 18:16-19, we read: *“God reached down from on high and took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. He delivered me! The Lord was my support. He delivered me, because he delighted in me.”* (Psalm 18:16-19)

Friends, aren’t there times in each of our lives when we may feel overwhelmed and we too may sense that we are drowning under a multitude of problems? Perhaps, this text is here, to say in part, *“Don’t lose heart. For it is at times like these that Christ will draw you out of your turbulence and calm for you also the storms of your life!”* And certainly, as we approach the end of our lives, you and I will have to step out from family and friends and walk through the waters of death. It is then that we are invited to fix our eyes on Jesus, to trust in Him, and to know that he will draw us safely back home to our Heavenly Father!

But here’s another question I am hoping we might explore in the time left to us today! When the Lord calls out to us, the way that Jesus called out to Peter here, *“How Can We Know It’s Jesus?”*

Of course, we will always be able to recognize Jesus, when he is speaking to us through his very own words preserved for us in the New Testament. Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish!”* (John 10:14-16, 27-29)

Of course, we hear Jesus speaking to us, already as infants and small children in the waters of our Baptism, *“Let the little children come unto me! Do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God, like a little child shall not enter it! And Jesus took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them!”* (Mark 10:10-13)

Of course, we always know it’s Jesus when we are gathered together to celebrate his Holy Supper! *“Take and eat, this is my Body given into death for you! Take and drink, this is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of all your sins!”* (Matthew 26)

But I believe that there are also times when Jesus calls out to us and challenges us to do something in our lives that may seem as nearly impossible for us, as was the challenge Jesus set before Peter, *"Come!"* (V. 29)

**And I am speaking here not only about those tough personal choices you may have to make regarding your career and chosen profession, who it is that you will marry, which church you should belong to, and so forth.** I am talking about the challenges which the Risen Christ may be setting before you and me also in terms of our active discipleship, and how we are manifesting to the world and the church, that we truly are his committed followers!

Friends, usually the challenge will be great enough that we are forced to admit our need upon the Lord and his grace to make it happen. Remember the feeding of the 5000? *"Five barley loaves and two fish,"* what are they among so many. In our hands, not that much, but when placed into the Lord's hands the original amount of food is immaterial.

Jesus never says that discipleship will be easy. Shortly after he tells the disciples, *"You will be fishers of men,"* he also goes on to tell them that he is going to empower them to *"take up your cross and follow me!"*

If you take a close look at Matthew's Gospel, you will never see Jesus pulling any punches with his disciples! In Matthew 10 we read of Jesus saying to his disciples: ***"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves! (Matthew 10:16)***

Jesus tells us repeatedly to count the cost of true discipleship?

He says in Luke 14, ***"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish!'"***

And the good news is that when Peter ventured forth, even though the going was rough, even though he almost sank and perished, Jesus reached out his hand and he caught him, just at the right moment. He helped Peter back into the boat. He stilled the wind and the waves, and Peter was saved. But if Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus.

**I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith?** The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

**It is only when Peter takes his eyes off Jesus that he begins to sink rather than to soar.** That's how being a follower of Jesus works. As long as we are focused on our faith, we're all right. When we focus on our fears, we are in trouble!

**You know it's true. If I laid a 10-foot-long plank on the floor of the chancel, directly in front of this altar, hardly any of us would have any difficulty walking on it.** However, if I were to suspend that plank 50 feet into the air, how many of you would volunteer to perform that same feat? **Our consciousness of our circumstances would overwhelm our confidence about walking the plank. That, of course, is what happened to Simon Peter.** He suddenly became aware of the wind and the waves and the great depth of the water beneath his feet. He became nervous when he suddenly realized the absurdity of his situation and he began to panic, and if Jesus had not been there, he would probably have drowned.

**Did you know that sometimes happens in a church? A small group of people have a dream for their church and they begin to believe that this dream is from God. They believe they are following Jesus.** And soon they have a plan. And then that plan begins to materialize. Others are won to their cause. A winning and wonderful future begins to take shape. **But then the inevitable happens. Opposition begins to materialize in the congregation. "It's too expensive,"** some begin to say. **"It's too radical. It'll bankrupt the church. I understand old Mr. So-and-So is against it**

**and if he leaves, he will take his money with him.”** And on it goes. So, because we prefer peace in the church more than we prize progress, support begins to falter and soon disappears altogether. Someone once said: **“Most churches will die of boredom long before they die of controversy.”**

**How can a dream dissipate that once seemed to be God’s will for a church?**

**People take their eyes for just a moment off of Jesus. They listen to their fears rather than their faith.** They are more conscious of the opposition than the opportunity God has given them to do something wonderful. That is the story of every church that has somehow failed to be what Christ has called it to be. Somewhere along the way there was a turning point when the sound of the wind drowned out the sound of the Savior’s voice. Keep your eyes upon Jesus. That is the secret of doing great things for God.

**This is also the secret of a fulfilling life.** Focus on your faith not your fears. No matter how fierce the storm, ignore the wind and the waves and listen to the voice of the Master.

**But let’s not forget for one moment this morning that the greatest challenge that was ever set before anyone was not Jesus’ challenge to Peter to walk on the water! It was God the Father’s challenge to his only-begotten Son to come in our world, to live the perfect life for every one of us we could never live, fulfilling the Law of God completely for us in our place! Then, in obedience to his Father completely, Jesus went to the cross and died there in payment of our sins, be raised again from the dead on the third day to assure us that the Father accepted the sacrifice the Son made on our behalf.** The Holy Spirit is here again today to convince of the complete veracity of this very thing!

Let God give you again this morning the faith of the Psalmist (Psalm 46)! **“God is our refuge and strength; very present help in trouble! Therefore, even though the mountains shake and be carried into the heart of the sea; we will not fear, for the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge! He says, *“Be still and know that I am God!”*”**

May I say that again? He says, ***“Be still and know that I am God!”*** Amen