



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Hanging on for Dear Life

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 10, 2014  
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 14:22-33*

This story of Jesus' walking on the water is deeply engrained in our cultural consciousness—in all sorts of ways. In preparing the sermon, I actually resorted to reading a lot of jokes that have to do with walking on water. All of them were really bad, but there was one about a Unitarian and Jesus on a fishing trip that almost made it into my sermon. Maybe another time. Walking on water has come to be an idiom all its own: "What's up with that jerk," we ask, "does he think he walks on water?"—a question not usually intended as a compliment. Given our modern understanding of weight, gravity and such things, it is a bit unfortunate that Matthew chose this conceit as the mechanism for explaining what is in fact a very serious, quite contemporary and deeply reassuring point about God and us.

Scholars believe this to be a very old story about Jesus, perhaps having been circulated even prior to the writing of the Gospel of Mark, which was the first of the gospels to be written. If so, it is odd in a way that the story is found only in Matthew. We could wonder about that—asking, for example, if Matthew simply went too far—but probably without much basis to conclude anything. As miracles go, I suppose, walking on water is no more or less spectacular than others. The problem with miracles is real whether their intervention into the laws of physics or biology is dramatic or mundane. Each of us who attempt to read our sacred scripture seriously has to come to some conclusion about how we regard these stories. It is an interesting discussion but not nearly so interesting for me this morning as our considering the strong symbolism in Matthew's story, which has given rise to so many bad jokes, a great deal of other commentary, and a particular slant to our theology.

The Sea of Galilee is the setting. Of course, it isn't a sea at all but a freshwater lake, the lowest freshwater lake in the world. Good-sized even to us, with more than 64 square miles and 140 feet at its deepest point, it seemed and was indeed huge in the era of Jesus, a time when even the best fishers had only small boats powered by the wind and vigorous paddling. With no radar and just the clouds to predict the weather, storms were a real and present threat; lives were quite literally at stake. And beyond that and probably because of it, the sea was also described as the great abyss, a mysterious place of monsters, dragons and such—the venue in which the miraculous power of God is often demonstrated. The Psalms contain the frequent and fervent cries of various psalmists, imploring God to settle the stormy seas, a metaphor then and now for our desire for God's help.

We understand the context, often saying, "we have just hit a rough patch" or "we are going through some stormy waters." We, like the disciples, spend our lives negotiating for smooth waters—or at least waters that will not overwhelm. What makes this story important is that our reading of it—and more than that our internalizing this view of God—places in our minds the idea that life's storminess is one of and perhaps **the** most significant domain for God's interaction with us. More specifically this miracle story has inculcated in us the notion that when the storms of life get rough, Jesus, Christ, God—somebody upon whom we can call—is going to be there. And in that light, this story lives as the crucible in which we understand what and how it means to live as one in relationship to the Divine. Often the way we regard God is determined by whether or not we "feel" supported or delivered from our stormy seas.

How do we truly process the theology deriving from this story, which is so basic in our lives? Do we hear it as a story about faith, about how much faith we have or don't have? Peter, in a burst of faithfulness and, I'd say, impulsivity, plunges into the sea to walk himself, only to lose his nerve, waiver, and begin to sink. Jesus reproves his less than impressive faith but saves him and the others nonetheless, an action that seems to refute the idea that

there is a solid line between our faith and God's action. In fact, this narrative detail is a strong argument for the presence of God's mercy with little regard to our worthiness.

The key verse in the story for me occurs fairly early in the tale, just after the disciples conclude that what they see is a ghost. Jesus identifies himself: "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid." In real life—at least in my real life—these are the life-saving words in the passage, the words upon which I can forever count. Because the story proceeds like a good story should, all settles down when Jesus comes aboard. I wish I could attest to that. The best I can say is that turbulence always ends one way or another—either we drown in it or crash because of it or most often simply move on through it. But my experience of life is not that the Good Shepherd, the Mighty Sailor, or the Risen Christ at just the right moment waves a magic wand or speaks a powerful incantation to deliver me from the disaster in which I have found myself. Oh, I have asked for such instant intervention and honestly probably shall again—though now largely as an impulse I just can't control; but it is in the end pretty empty.

But what does sustain me is some version of these cherished words coming to me, never audible, but nonetheless loud and clear: "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid." It doesn't necessarily dissuade my fear—not instantly anyway—and sometimes really not at all. But it reminds me to breathe and to remember that I am not the only person who has ever been afraid and lived to tell it, and above everything else it reminds me that I am not alone. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, despite dying way too early, left a lifetime of words, prayers, and the example of a journeyer who never stopped evolving and changing in good times and bad. He morphed from the certainty of a young man in the ecstasy of conversion in his famous book, *Seven Storey Mountain*, into one at the end of his life who was open, unsure, and convinced that the God of Christianity was much larger than he had once assumed. He took us with him on his journey and once prayed as most of us could, "I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

In the end I adore this story about Jesus. It is one of the classics, which keeps me going and believing. Though I rarely get in a boat—and never a small fishing one—this, my friends, is where we live. We live in or near the deep all the time; some form of tumult is a near-constant companion. We face uncertainties about jobs, health, money, our safety and that of those we love so desperately, uncertainties about meaning, about what going to work every day and coming home really mean, and uncertainties about the state of the world—to mention only a few. But somehow this simple story, so fantastical as almost to be missed or dismissed, reminds us of the most critical truth in the world: When we are faithful and when we are not, when we can believe and when we are mostly unbelieving, the voice of God whispers when we can hear it and when we cannot: "Take heart; it is I; be not afraid."

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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