



“Get Out of the Boat”

Matthew 14:22-33

You’ve got to step out of the boat if you are going to put your trust in Jesus.

Last week, we saw that when summoned by Jesus, “Come, follow me,” Peter dropped everything and went. Today we are deep into the story of Peter and Jesus. It is a story about faith and trust. It is our story too.

Another storm

Perhaps the skies were darkening as the disciples climbed into the boat. Some were experienced fishermen and knew how quickly ferocious storms could form over the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps they even thought about the time not long before when they had awakened Jesus to save them from a storm (Matthew 8:23-27). He had, of course, saved them, calming the storm and chastising the disciples for their “little faith” (*oligopistos* in the Greek).

But, most likely, their minds were consumed with what they had just experienced. Just hours before, on a remote shore, Jesus had miraculously fed a huge throng. In front of their own eyes, he had taken five loaves of bread and two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broken the bread . . . and fed thousands. Then, Jesus had quickly sent the disciples on ahead, instructing them to get into the boat and head out across the sea while he headed into the hills to be alone and to pray.

Jesus had never sent them ahead of him before. He had always been with them, there to protect and to lead. But now they were in the boat alone, heading across the sea, buffeted by strong headwinds. Shortly before dawn, the disciples looked out across the sea and saw a shocking and, indeed, terrifying sight – Jesus was walking toward them across the surface of the sea. Terrifying indeed, for these first century Jews. Iwan Russell-Jones elaborates:

In Hebraic thought, water represents much more than a mere physical reality. Whether it is the sea with its unfathomable depths, the relentless river in full flood, or the all-consuming deluge, there is something metaphysical about the threat water poses to human life. According to Karl Barth, water, in the first biblical creation story, is “the principle which, in its abundance and power is absolutely opposed to God’s creation;” “it is a representative of all the evil powers which oppress and resist the salvation intended for the people of Israel.”

Throughout the Old Testament it is precisely this reality over which God’s lordship is continuously demonstrated and God’s victory affirmed. In the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2), in the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8–17), in the mighty act of deliverance from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21), and in the miraculous entry into the land of promise through the swollen River Jordan (Josh. 3:14–17), the Lord triumphs over the waters.

The God of Israel tramples on the waves (Job 9:8, Hab. 3:15) and walks “in the recesses of the deep” (Job 38:16). These are very specific signs of God’s sovereign and transcendent power over all that would threaten and thwart God’s purposes (cf. Ps. 93:4).

So when Jesus approaches the disciples in their boat as they battle with the elements, the prospect is, naturally, terrifying. Who can walk here with such authority and freedom? The act and its associations

are unmistakable. Jesus is exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone. When he speaks to them, his words serve only to reinforce the sense that this is a divine revelation.¹

This story begs us to use our imaginations. Perhaps this is why so much of the Bible is stories. We can put ourselves in the story in a way that we could never engage an essay on doctrine. Who wouldn't be a little anxious about climbing into the boat without Jesus? There is no indication that Jesus gave the disciples any instruction about what he wanted them to do when they reached the other side of the sea. Who wouldn't be scared as the sea rose and the boat struggled? Who wouldn't be terrified to look over the side of the boat and see someone, anyone, walking on the water? Who might not think it's a ghost or at least a hallucination? Nobody can walk on water . . . or can they?

Would I respond as Peter did? That is the question. Would I get out of the boat? Peter did. He heard Jesus call out in the wind and identify himself. He heard Jesus tell them all to set aside their fear, to "take courage." Peter yelled out that if Jesus called him, Peter would walk out to him. And when Jesus said, "Come," Peter climbed over the side of the boat. When he got out there, for at least a few moments Peter walked on the surface of the water himself. But then the wind hit his face. Perhaps he realized what he was doing. Regardless, he looked toward the storm and away from Jesus – and sank like a rock. Thrusting his hand upward, Peter cried out "Save me." And Jesus did. But he also rebuked Peter for his "little faith," *oligopistos*.² Pointedly, Jesus asked Peter, "Why did you doubt?"

The Purpose of Matthew's Gospel

Everyone who writes anything does so with a purpose. It might be to inform or to persuade. It might be to get a good grade or create a record of what happened. Every writer brings not only a purpose, but a point of view. This was no less true of the Gospel writers than it is any other author. Scripture is, to use Paul's phrase, "God-breathed," but it is also the work of human authors. Thus, an important question is, "What can we know about Matthew's purpose in writing?"

Matthew was Jewish and he wrote for a Jewish audience, which explains the lengthy Jewish genealogy that opens his Gospel. Matthew wrote his gospel late in his own life, as long as forty or more years after Jesus' death and resurrection in 30AD. Matthew had Mark's Gospel to work from, in addition to his own recollections and other sources. At times, Matthew copied Mark word-for-word, but at other times modified Mark's account, as in today's story. Why include Peter's stepping out of the boat when Mark does not?

It seems virtually certain that Matthew wrote for a community of Jewish Christians. He went so far as to avoid the phrase, 'kingdom of God,' for fear that the word "God" might offend those Jews who would not utter God's name in any form. Instead, Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven." He painstakingly portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecies and expectations.

When we read a story like today's, we can be comforted knowing that it was written to bolster the faith of Christians who struggled with doubts and fears just like our own. Matthew tells the story in this way so that his community would be strengthened in their faith, so that they would understand who it is they worshipped. Matthew wanted them to take risks, to step out of the boat, and to keep their eyes focused upon Jesus.

A story for the church

It isn't difficult to see why Matthew tells us the story in this way. He is writing to a post-resurrection church that can't see Jesus and touch Jesus as the disciples had years before. The disciples had climbed into the boat

¹ Iwan Russell-Jones, "Theological Perspective on Matthew 14:22–33," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 334.

² Matthew would use this word, *oligopistos*, again in the final passage before Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew only uses the word to describe the weak faith of believers, never unbelievers.

without Jesus beside them in the same way he always had. They felt alone but they weren't. Jesus was still their Lord, coming to them in the most surprising way. Matthew's community might feel alone, but they weren't alone. Jesus would come to these Christians also, in the most surprising ways.

In response to Jesus' call, Peter climbs out. He responds to Jesus in trust, in faith. But about as soon as he gets out, he takes his eyes off Jesus and sees the storm instead and sinks. Would it have been possible for Peter to have faith so strong that he could walk on water all the way to Jesus? I don't know. All I know is that Peter's faith was fragile, as is my own. It is far too easy, too human, to see the storm and discover that our faith has fled us, replaced by doubts and fears. But, Jesus was there to save Peter and is here to save us, to grasp our outstretched hands and pull us to safety. Surely, Matthew wants us to see all this in his telling of the story.

Despite Peter's sinking, notice one thing in the story. Peter does walk on water. He doesn't climb over the side and slip between the waves. He gets out of the boat and, at least for a moment, walks until he sees the wind. How that moment must have seemed to Peter. When he looked back on it, how did he feel? What thoughts ran through his brain? We can't know, but we can know this – if Peter had not gotten out of the boat, he could never have walked on water at all.

Getting out of the boat

When Jesus sent the disciples on alone, he knew that he would not always be with them as he was then. He would be with them always in another way, a different way. They would no longer be able to rely on their five senses for their faith in Jesus. They would have to learn that faith is about being certain of what we can't see (Hebrews 11:1). They would have to grow in ways that they couldn't even imagine at the time.

When Peter stepped out of the boat, he took a risk. It was only by taking a risk that he was able to walk on water at all, if even only for a few moments. We don't often think of our faith as being about risk-taking. We live in a world that makes it seem easy, without risk, to be a Christian – but that is an appealing lie. Being a Christian is risk free only so long as we don't take it too seriously, don't let our faith truly shape our priorities and agendas. Once we step forward to admit and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all creation, much less our own lives, we embark on a journey that is all about taking risks, about stepping out of the boat ourselves.

A few closing thoughts from N. T. Wright:

As far as we know, walking on water in the literal sense wasn't something the early Christians expected to do themselves. Paul, facing another shipwreck, never imagined that getting out of the boat and strolling off to the shore was a viable option. So it's likely that Matthew expects his readers to 'hear' this story in terms of their own journey of faith—and their own struggles with doubt.

There are many times when Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible. How can we even begin to do the task he's called us to? How can we even think of doing without that sin which we're asked to give up? How can we really suppose we might be able to develop a serious habit of prayer when we're so frantic and disorganized?

Of course, if like Peter we look at the waves being lashed by the wind, we will conclude that it is indeed impossible. What we are called to do—it's so basic and obvious, but so hard to do in practice—is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement (even if it does contain some rebuke as well). And our wills and hearts must be ready to do what he says, even if it seems crazy at the time.³

³ Wright, N.T. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 191.