

“Why Did You Doubt?”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 10, 2008 - the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
and Based on Matthew 14:22-33
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Near the end of our lesson from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Peter, soon to be blessed for the strength of his convictions—remember “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! ... I tell you, you are *Petros* / Peter, and on this *petra* / rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:17-18)? Here, Peter is scolded for his lack of faith. He has just ventured forth from the disciples’ storm-tossed boat. His eyes fixed upon Jesus, he has actually walked on water just as Jesus was doing. But now, having lost sight of his Lord—fearful, no doubt, because of the strong wind all about him—he has begun to sink. So cries out, “Lord, save me!” And his Lord does save him. But he also rebukes him. “*Why* did you doubt?” Jesus wants to know. And we, skeptics all, also want to know, “*Why did* you doubt, Peter?” For we have another question in mind, one that we very much want *Jesus* to answer. What is so awful about doubting?

We do want to know the answer to that question, do we not? I do. I believe that doubting is a good thing, that it is in the nature of our lives here on earth to doubt the certainties that have been handed down to us. Partly this is what young people everywhere do and, to a certain extent, must do: they must doubt the wisdom of their elders. How else to acquire that wisdom for themselves? But there is another kind of doubting that we never outgrow, and that we never should outgrow, namely, the doubting that questions hollow conviction. We should always be skeptical of claims that cannot be justified. How many of them there are! We live in a time when people make up convictions as if they were fashions. Nothing backs them up, not experience, not logic, and not even conviction itself, at least not when the going gets rough. Then, these would-be believers come undone, for they have no root in them. But until that time of testing, they reign supreme. No, we should not doubt doubt, not even in the realm of religion—and *especially* not in the realm of religion! Alas, religion breeds hollow convictions.

So, Jesus, what was it, exactly, that Peter did that was so wrong?

He lost sight of his Master. That’s the simple answer, and the one preached with the greatest conviction. “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”

Easy for you to say, preacher. And in truth, the answer is too easy. It’s not wrong. It’s just said with too little backup. For those out there in that boat on the storm-tossed sea, it’s a platitude. And in that setting, a platitude is worse than hollow.

So here’s the backup for Jesus’ conviction. It’s the gospel truth.

The disciples in the boat? It’s the normal condition of life. We were never meant

to remain on the shore watching Jesus work all the miracles, feeding those five thousand men, besides the women and the children. That story immediately precedes our lesson. Jesus was out there surrounded by people wanting him to cure their sick, which he did. He had compassion on them all, and cured every last one of them. But then evening came and his disciples wanted him to send the crowds away so they could get some food. “You feed them,” Jesus said. But they protested. “All we’ve got is five loaves and two fish.” “Bring them to me,” Jesus said. And looking up to heaven, he blessed them, broke them, and gave them to all. “And all ate and were filled,” Matthew’s gospel says. And then, in our lesson for today he goes on to say, “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds” (Matt. 14:22). Why did the disciples cross the lake? To get to the other side—where the people were who were in need of healing. The normal condition of life for persons of faith is to be out and about in search of people in need of healing.

Sure enough, a storm comes up. That’s normal too. Our lesson says it “battered” their boat. The Greek is even stronger: it “tormented” / *basanidzo* their boat. The last time that word was used in the gospel of Matthew was in the story of the two demoniacs in the country of the Gadarenes (Matt. 8:28-9:1). Interestingly enough, that story also took place after Jesus and his disciples got into a boat to cross over to the other side, a journey during which another faith-testing storm arose. But it’s the demons that possessed the demoniacs that I’m interested in here. The demons wanted to know, “What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to *basanidzo* us?” Being battered, being tormented, even, is the normal condition of life. If you thought the thousand-and-one things that could go wrong and do represented a conspiracy against you, you’re right! It is our fate to have endure this normal tendency towards chaos.

But terror, that is something else. The disciples were terrified, our lesson says, when they saw Jesus walking on the water. Being terrified is not normal, at least we hope it is not. For it is the condition of being paralyzed with fear, of being so overcome by the apparition before us that we can only shrink back to our own destruction. Terrorists want this paralysis to occur. Jesus wants.... Well, what *did* he want out there, walking on that water? He wanted to get to the other side—to where the action was, to where the people were in need of healing. And yet, when his disciples saw him—or, rather, when they did not see him (for they did not recognize him, Scripture says)—they were terrified. Why?

Because he appeared to them as a ghost, as a power from beyond the grave, and the thing filled them with dread. Was this apparition friend or foe? It was hard enough contending with the waves. But that, at least, was something they could imagine themselves as equal to. It was an illusion, of course. The waves were much greater than they were. They knew that. But it was an illusion to which they clung even so, for there were stories, were there not, of sailors surviving even the worst of storms. There was hope. Best not to dwell too much on the other stories, the ones about sailors lost at sea, and boats dashed upon the rocks.

Here, however, was something wholly beyond their grasp. Who can contend with a ghost?

“Take heart,” Jesus said, “it is I; do not be afraid.” And if you can hear the “I AM WHO I AM; I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” in his words, you are doing very well.

Peter wanted proof. “If it is you, Lord, then command me to come to you on the water.” Enable me, in other words, to enjoy the same power you enjoy. Then I will know that it truly is you, and not some malevolent power.

There are some who want to rebuke Peter for this request. They want to say that he behaved like Satan did during Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. “If you are the Son of God,” Satan said, “then do this, do that, do my bidding” (Matt. 4:1-11), all of which Jesus roundly refused. But at this point in the story, Jesus refrained from rebuking Peter, and so do I. Peter was afraid. Fear is a powerful thing. Had he not spoken out, the entire boatload of disciples could very well have sunk, and what would have been the good of that? So he spoke up, and Jesus responded with “Come.” There is nothing to prevent you from walking on water, Peter. The same power that upholds me, can uphold you as well. Come.

Which Peter did. And he actually found himself walking on water! But then he took his eyes off his Master and he began to sink. Why? Because in this respect, at least, he felt he no longer needed his Lord. He had the faith he sought to conquer his fears. He could now walk on water. The power was his! Yes, it was a gift. Yes, Jesus was the one who gave it to him. But now he owned it. And look what was happening! He was walking on water! Omigosh! Look... My God! Look at the waves, the terrifying waves! And in that blink of an eye, Peter’s courage left him. He began to sink, literally and figuratively. He was not equal to the powers that surrounded him, far from it. He was small and alone and afraid.

Fortunately, he did the one thing God wants all of us to do, whether in times of despair or of rejoicing. He called on the name of the Lord. “Lord, save me!” he cried. And the Lord heard his voice and he saved him. But not without this stern warning: *faith is not a thing to be possessed, but a relationship to be lived*. The moment we lose sight of the power that supports us and sustains us, the power that created us to begin with, we sink. And we would be sunk, too, if we did not plead with God to restore us to *his* salvation.

Faith is the trust we have in our Creator to redeem us from the terrors all around us. This faith may be sore tested. That, certainly, is what the disciples experienced. But it should not be doubted. To doubt it is to believe *we are* on our own, *and we should be on our own*. And that’s as hollow a conviction as there ever was one. Original sin, as one wag has said, is the one doctrine of the church that can be empirically proved.

It is God who saves us, and it is our relationship with him that lets this redemption take place. And because we are forever doubting this relationship, we can thank our lucky stars ... *we thank our most merciful God* that we are not abandoned to our folly. Quite the contrary. God hears our cry. He reaches out to us, and he saves us.

Believe it! Do not doubt it! And the blessings of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit will be with you always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.