

Going Overboard

Exodus 14:10-15, 21-22

Matthew 14:22-33

Bible Mission USA

Sermon Archive

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*“Peter got out of the boat,
started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.”*
(Matthew 14:29)

Don't gamble,” said Will Rogers. “Buy yourself some good stock. Hold it till it goes up, then sell it. If it doesn't go up, don't buy it!”

The humor there, just in case you missed it, is that the market itself is a bit of a gamble. Investment always includes the element of risk.

Venture capitalists push risk to the limit. They look for potential in some little known product or service and back it with big bucks in the hope everybody will make some money.

That's as good a description of the Christian Faith as I've heard! Christianity is a venture faith. It asks you to risk investing it all! A faith that takes no risks is a faith that is not worth having.

And that's the point of the passage we've just read, about a little boat in a storm and Jesus out there on the water.

Jesus Comes to Us

This story has always spoken to the church's storm-tossed existence in every age. Is Christ master of all the forces that threaten to overwhelm and sink the church?

That sort of question cannot be answered with quasi-scientific investigations into the feasibility of walking on the water. The question to be asked is: *what was Matthew's purpose in telling us this story in the first place?*

This story is about a storm that swept down suddenly on a little boat far out to sea in the middle of

the night! It was being “*battered* [well, the literal word used here is *tortured!*] *by the waves.*” Worst of all, the disciples were alone out there and frightened.

So Matthew assures us, Jesus “*came to them walking on the water.*”

Matthew’s big point, you see, is not so much that Jesus walked on the water. Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus came to his disciples in their time of need, every obstacle to the contrary notwithstanding. Jesus “*came to them*”!

This is one of faith’s big discoveries. When trouble turns up, Jesus shows up. He seems to ride the very wave that threatens to overwhelm us. One of the church’s strong hymns reminds us of this,

“He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.”

(God Moves in a Mysterious Way)

Of course those fellows in the boat didn’t know all this. They didn’t even recognize Jesus when he showed up on that dark and stormy night. They thought he was a “*ghost*” and “*cried out in fear.*”

They must have figured (well, anyway, *I* would have figured it this way) ‘No one can do that! No one can walk on the water!’

Hearing the terror in their voices, Jesus called out to them from the center of the storm reassuring them, “*Take heart! It is I. Don’t be afraid.*”

When the storm is most vicious we often hear Jesus’ voice most clearly. When we are at our weakest we become surest – it is the Lord!

Coming to Jesus

Up to this point everything in the story seems aimed at reassuring us when we are overwhelmed.

Then suddenly the story takes an unexpected turn. Without warning, we are caught up in a tug-of-war between wanting to believe in the power of Christ, and at the same time finding ourselves threatened by the overpowering waves.

Peter – wouldn’t you just know it! – Peter steps forward intent on resolving the struggle.

He calls out across the howling wind churning the sea into foam, “*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*” That’s Peter for you!

But if you’re using your imagination you’ve got to wonder what are the other disciples in the boat doing? It doesn’t say. But

I'm pretty certain they weren't queuing up to go overboard with Peter!

I see them crouching down along the keel of the boat trying to keep the unstable craft low in the water and balanced.

If we listen, we might even hear what they are saying. As Peter throws his leg over the gunnel to get out of the boat they are shouting, 'Peter, don't be an idiot! We don't care who says he's out there on the water talking to you, *you* get back in the boat!' That's what I'd say, wouldn't you?

'Think this thing through man! Don't be a jackass! Get back in the boat!'

All of which presses the question, how much *venture* does faith call for, how much risk? Is there any room for impulsiveness in your faith? Have you ever noticed how Jesus delighted in extravagant disciples?

There was that woman who broke the *entire* bottle of perfume and poured it all over the Lord. The disciples were indignant about the waste.

But Jesus promised that the whole world would remember her act of love...and we have! She prepared the Lord's body before-

hand for burial (Mark 14:3-9). Jesus loved her extravagance.

Four men arrived late to church carrying their friend on a stretcher. The place was packed. So to get him close to Jesus they tore the roof off the house and lowered the fellow down to Jesus right in the middle of his sermon (Mark 2:1-12)!

If that had happened in a Presbyterian Church, we would be scandalized. But Jesus said that's the sort of faith I'm looking for. He loved their extravagance.

Matthew was a tax collector. He was the richest man in town – and the most hated. Yet Jesus called this despicable character to follow Him and become his disciple.

So this despised tax-collecting collaborator got up and followed Jesus, leaving behind a 'six figure income' (Matthew 9:9)! If that's not extravagant I don't know the meaning of the word.

Playing It Safe

Nor does the Bible exhaust the folly. A quick glance at church history confirms this.

- Francis of Assisi was born into wealth, but rejected all his family's riches and privileges for a life of voluntary poverty.

- Father Damien lived among lepers on the Island of Molokai until he became a leper and died a leper.
- Toyohiko Kagawa slept with the poor in the slums of Tokyo to earn the right to tell them about Jesus.
- Albert Schweitzer abandoned all the distinction he could have enjoyed in Europe for disease he faced in Africa.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer went back into Germany in the Second World War, squared off against Adolf Hitler and paid for it with his life.

Who are these crazy people? And what makes them act the way they do?

Seeing the squalor in which Mother Teresa served the dying in Calcutta, a reporter told that gentle lady of mercy, “I wouldn’t do what you do for a million dollars.” To which Mother Teresa answered, “Neither would I”!

What preposterous things some people do for Jesus. You can’t pay them enough to do it! Yet they will lay down their lives freely, willingly, eagerly for their Lord.

Yet sometimes regular church folks react to such extravagant

commitment with a sort of cool disdain.

Their religion shuns the passion of any burning enthusiasm. Dismissing it as ‘emotionalism,’ they settle instead for religious rituals – venturing little and risking nothing.

Get Out of the Boat

But Peter with the storm in his face throws his leg over the side of the boat and asks only for permission. You say the word Lord, and I’ll get out of this boat and “*come to you on the water.*”

Matthew sets this before us not as foolishness, but as faith!

It was the same for those Israelites stranded between the Sea and Pharaoh’s Army. God told them, turn toward the Sea and “*go forward.*” Put your feet in the surf and then, only then, will I part the waters for your safe escape. That was a step of faith.

It’s the same with Peter. He’s about to take a step of faith out onto the water. He must have come to the daring thought, ‘If Christ can walk the waves, why can’t I?’

We don’t think this way much. We set Christ in a different

category from ourselves partly to justify our mediocrity. We say *Jesus* could heal the sick, feed the crowds, preach the gospel, resist temptation and forgive abuse. But don't expect *me* to do things like that.

And clinging to our little boats of religious correctness we substitute decent behavior and social propriety for *faith*, and frustrate God's purpose.

God's intention has always been to transform our lives into channels of his grace poured out upon a broken and dying world. But with little stomach for such a commission many stay in the boat and settle for religious routines.

Going Overboard

In case you think this is 'just preaching,' watch Jesus' reaction to the fellow clambering out of the boat in the middle of the storm. What says the Master? 'Don't be crazy, Peter, get back in the boat before you drown'?

Not on your life! Jesus calls back, "*Come on!*" He encouraged Peter's risky extravagance.

I know you want to remind me he didn't make it. No he didn't, not completely anyway. But Peter was the only one out there going

for it. And anyway what's the worst that can happen. When terror overcame Peter's faith he slipped beneath the waves. But what does it go on to say?

"Jesus reached out his hand and caught him."

Our Lord is always close to us, especially when we are taking risky steps of faith.

When Christ says "*Come*" it's time to get out of the boat and leave behind whatever else you've been counting on for security. The safest place in all-the-world is to get out of our little boats and go overboard for Jesus.

Christians today and the Church need to ask, 'What are we risking for our Lord that we could not possibly accomplish in our own strength or cleverness?'

To put this differently, what would it take to so trust in Jesus you would be willing to follow Peter overboard?

Christ is still standing out there in places that seem as insecure as water and threatening as a storm. From within the unpredictable winds and waves Jesus calls out, "*Come!*" When you hear His call,

*Get out of the boat
and go overboard for Him!*