

Keep Your Eyes on Jesus!

(Matthew 14:22–33) ²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. ²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

In Christ Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, dear fellow redeemed,

All eyes had been on Jesus, and for good reason. He had just spent the entire day teaching the people, healing their sick, and when the hour grew late, he even fed them – many thousands of them – with nothing more than five loaves of bread and two small fish. Oh yes, all eyes were on Jesus and the people liked what they were seeing.

You can understand why. They saw in Jesus a man who could do away with all the problems that come with living life in a world ruined by sin. In fact, in his gospel, St. John reports that the people had in mind to make Jesus their king, by force if necessary. Knowing that the people were missing completely the goal of his saving mission, Jesus broke up the crowd, put his disciples in a boat, and then, went off by himself to pray.

The crowd was right, of course, to be looking at Jesus as someone special, but they failed to see how special he really is. They saw him only as a means to a happier earthly life. They wanted him to be their bread-king, their doctor, and their secretary of defense all rolled into one, a man who could put their doubts and fears to rest once and for all. What they failed to realize, as we often do, is the fact that all doubts and fears come from within. They are the product of a sinful heart. Food, health, and safety, even when all are in great abundance, don’t stop us from worrying about tomorrow. For this we need our Savior. We need him to do for us what he came here to do, namely to rescue us from sin’s curse. With this in mind, today and always, **Keep Your Eyes on Jesus!** 1) see that he is God with you; and 2) see that he is God for you!

As we heard, Jesus immediately sent his disciples off in a boat, very likely to keep them from falling prey to that tempting notion of making Jesus a king. The boat ride certainly gave them the opportunity to talk about the things they had seen and heard. They were struggling to make sense of it all. St. Mark tells us that they had not understood about the loaves. (Mark 6:52). They never got a chance to finish that conversation because a sudden storm kept them occupied with other matters. Soon they were tugging on the oars with all their might, fighting against the violent wind and surging waves. I wonder if those men thought to themselves or dared to say out loud, “Thanks, Jesus, for sending us on this boat ride!”

If those men thought that Jesus was oblivious to their troubles, they were dead wrong. St. Mark tells us that although Jesus was alone on the land when his disciples were in the middle of the Sea

of Galilee, **“He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.” (Mark 6:48).** What a comforting reminder for you and me. Troubles can often leave us feeling forgotten and alone. But that just isn’t true. Jesus knows what’s happening in our lives. He sees us straining at the oars of every problem we face. And he does this not as some disinterested observer. Not at all. Keep your eyes on Jesus! See that he is God with you. Look! **Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. (Matthew 14:25).**

This loving gesture is misunderstood. The disciples shriek in fear, believing that they are seeing a ghost – a phantom that might well be an omen of their own impending deaths. We have a saying, “When it rains, it pours.” Like those first disciples, we tend to see the worst in our circumstances, and so convince ourselves that we are doomed to be miserable. Jesus sets the record straight for his disciples then and now. He says: **“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27).**

With this simple phrase, “It is I,” Jesus says more than meets the ear. In the New Testament language of Greek, Jesus says quite literally, “I am.” Do you recognize that designation? It’s the same name by which God identified himself to Moses when he was filled with fear and worry. With these simple words, Jesus tells us, “I am your God, and I am here with you.” There’s more. Look at how Jesus came to these frightened men. He did not beam in on a ray light. Nor did he fly or float. He could have done any of those things. Instead, he chose to walk, and by doing so, he was showing those first disciples and all of us, that he, our God who is with us, walks on the waters of everything that scares us.

What has you scared these days? Is it your finances? Is it your health or that of a loved one? Are you mourning the passing of someone close to you, wondering how you will go on? Is your marriage on the rocks? Are you afraid for your kids or grandkids and the choices they are making? Take courage! Don’t be afraid! Jesus is at your side, walking on the waters of any and all such fears. This is simply another way of saying that he’s in charge of the things that scare you. Really? Then why are they still in your life? Why doesn’t Jesus make them go away? Why? Because he plans to use these troubles in the way that he knows is best for you, one that will bring you his eternal blessings. This isn’t wishful thinking. This is the sure and certain promise of Scripture stated in the inspired words of the Apostle Paul: **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28).**

It doesn’t get clearer than that, and yet the doubts that attack our faith try to poke holes in God’s promises. For example, in moments of great doubt I might wonder if I really have been called according to God’s purpose. I might wonder if I’m really numbered among those who love God. Maybe I am one who can’t count on God’s blessings. If you’re listening to these sinful doubts of mine, you’ll notice that doubt takes the focus off of God and puts it all on me.

Doubt worked the same way in Peter’s life. When Peter saw that Jesus had come to them walking on the wave-tossed seas, his faith soared as he said to Jesus: **“tell me to come to you on the water.” (Matthew 14:28).** “Come.” Jesus said. With eyes on Jesus, **“...Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.” (Matthew 14:29).** All was well until, faith gave way to doubt. Peter took his eyes off Jesus. He looked at the wind and waves instead and must have thought: “I can’t walk on water. I’m going to sink and drown.” Down he went. Had he lost his faith? Not at all. In the next instant faith did what God creates faith to do, it looked to Jesus: **“Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14:30)** Peter cried. **Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. (Matthew 14:31).**

In that moment, as always, Jesus was teaching a valuable truth to Peter, and now to us. It is a lesson that is driven home with a question: **“You of little faith,” Jesus said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).** Think of all that Peter had witnessed in that one day alone – miraculous healings, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on water, and his own hike on the high seas. Why did he doubt? Why do you doubt? Why do I? I ask myself this question all

the time. I get frustrated over my lack of faith. Maybe you can relate? Like Peter, we've seen and experienced so many miracles of God's grace. In love, God sought and found us when we were lost and hell bound. He brought us to the baptismal font and there named us his children. And look what's he's done ever since that day. He has trained us up in his Word. He has nourished us with his sacrament. Oh, and how many times has he dropped everything to rescue us silly sheep as we wander off into one spiritual danger after another? All this grace has come to us. So why do we doubt?

We doubt, because on this side of heaven we remain sinful human beings. We let the wind and waves of adversity terrify us because we fail to remember all that God has done for us and promised to us. Forgetfulness is a huge problem for us Christians. Another is sinful self-reliance, more properly called idolatry. This is the sin of trusting in ourselves rather than trusting in God above all things. Trouble comes and we decide that we can handle it. We decide that we're clever enough or tough enough to weather the storm, only to discover that brains and brawn won't solve the kind of problem that we're facing. At this point we might look inward, wondering why we're sinking, why our faith isn't seeing us through. "I'm a Christian!" we remind ourselves. "This shouldn't get me down." But here too our focus is misplaced as we put our faith in faith itself rather than on faith's Creator. It's always at such moments that I find faith so elusive. I can't get my hands on it. Of course, I can't. Faith isn't something I can see under a microscope or weigh on the bathroom scale. Instead, faith is a wonderful, invisible gift from God. It's the spiritual organ he creates in us at our baptism and its sole purpose is to receive and embrace the saving promises of God.

Faith isn't something to search for and find. Faith is something to feed. Paul says in Romans 10: **...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. (Romans 10:17)**. Christians, when we are in crisis, as we often are, it does us no good to try to figure out what's going on with our faith. Don't look around for your faith. Instead keep your eyes on Jesus. Read his Word. Come to his Supper. Taste and see that he is God for you. Jesus will speak to your faith and grow it. He's with you to reach out his hand and save you. How can you be sure? Because of the tremendous sacrifice he's already made for you. Think of those beautiful words from Romans 8: **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)**.

God's one purpose for sending Jesus into this world is to have you with him forever. To this end Jesus lived his life perfectly. To this end he has given you all the credit for his perfect trust in God's will, even when God's will meant going fearlessly to the cross and suffering the torments of hell itself to pay for your sinful doubts and fears, your sinful self-reliance and all the other sins that stain your life day after day. With his one saving purpose in mind, God has called you to faith in Jesus and has moved you to love him by loving you first.

God's love for you is boundless and unfailing. Nothing could stop his love from making you his own and nothing will stop God's love from keeping you his own. That's what he's busy doing right now. He's walking on the waters of your life, seeing to it that you are his forever. Believe it, my friends. Whatever is happening with you, whether it's smooth sailing or turbulent seas, keep your eyes on Jesus. He's with you. He's for you. And know that because he is with us and for us, **[nothing] in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39)**. Amen.