

Grace Episcopal Church of Galena, IL
August 10, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

"Peter's Plunge"

Text -- Matthew 14: 22-33

Fifteen years ago right now, our nation—indeed much of the developed world—was preparing for and anticipating the dawn of a new millennium. Some, just like those 1,000 years before feared the apocalypse, the end of the world. Banks, the government, ordinary businesses and organizations like the one I had worked for, declared the full employment act for computer programs and systems analysts who were brought in to recode programs to make sure they would recognize the year 2,000 and not crash and disrupt our economic, defense, and other societal systems.

The travel industry was affected, too, preparing creative travel packages for those who might want to mark this time with a special celebration. In the Holy Land, larger numbers of Pilgrims were expected. New hotels and parking lots were being built in Nazareth; Manger Square in Bethlehem was being cleared of buses and souvenir vendors. But one of the oddest plans that I recall was in the Sea of Galilee. A bridge—a pathway--would be built just a few inches below water level so that people might experience what it would be like to "walk on water."

At the time, I tried and tried to understand why anyone would find that exciting. It wouldn't be at all like walking on the surface of water. Even riding a zipline with its harnesses and tethers gives a sensation of flying. Walking on a submerged bridge would be like wading in water, except on a solid surface instead of sand. And you can be sure that people wouldn't be walking on it in the darkest hours of the night in the midst of a ferocious storm!

Well, the designers must have thought better of that idea. An internet search doesn't turn up any mention of it fifteen years later. The search did find a number of other things, however—many ways to explain away this Gospel text and the supernatural act of Jesus walking on the water. These ranged from a minor translation of a Greek word that changed the meaning to walking *by* or *beside* the water rather than *on* the water to suggestions that in the midst of a raging storm, visibility was reduced, so perhaps the disciples just thought Jesus was on the water but was really wading in the shallows nearer to shore. Then I found many links to a scientific discovery in 2006—that something called *springs ice* could have briefly formed at that particular time in the Sea of Galilee, giving Jesus some solid stepping stones.

Some of us seem to get hung up on whether or not miracles or supernatural events really

happened in biblical times. I suppose it is the mark of the scientific, rational age in which we live where it is much harder than for people in Biblical times to suspend what we see as reality. The trouble is, when we try to just explain away the miracle, we lose the very real power and the mystery and the meaning that this story can hold for us. When we focus only on the supernatural and Jesus as some kind of superhero, we miss his deep humanity.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus needing some time alone with God to rest and to pray—and especially to grieve the brutal murder of his cousin, John the Baptist. Such human needs he had, just as we do. Just as his disciples did. But the needs of all of those who insisted on following him were great, and he put aside his own need for theirs. He fed the 5,000-men-not-including-women-and-children with the loaves and fish. Now, at last, he takes that time, sending the disciples off in the boat by themselves and spent the night in prayer on the mountain top in silent conversation with God, the source of his strength. In the early morning hours—the fourth watch of the night between 3 and 6 am—he emerged to join the disciples whose boat, at the mercy of the storm, a contrary wind, was heading in the wrong direction.

The disciples, tossed by the raging wind and angry waves, had been unable to make it to the other shore—or to return to where they had started. But several were professional fishermen who knew that sea in all of its moods. Unlike the other story of Jesus stilling the waves and calming the sea, there is no indication here that they were in fear for their lives. After fighting the storm most of the night, adjusting the rigging, shifting their weight, and bailing, though, they were at the point of exhaustion when, through sheets of driving rain and the spray of the water, they saw a figure walking toward them *on top of the water*. A ghost? A hallucination? Very quickly they learn that it is Jesus when he calls out to them to relieve their fear! Imagine that for a moment! Imagine that as they began their boat trip, before the storm arose, they were talking—talking about what they had just witnessed with the loaves and fish. Trying to get a handle on that! And now, Jesus walks to them on the water! Maybe even a ghost would have been less scary. What kind of man was this that they were they following?

Peter wastes no time cowering in fear! Dear bumbling, impetuous Peter. The disciple who often seemed to be doing the wrong thing, asking the wrong question, and after Jesus' arrest, even denying him three times. But he was also the disciple who stuck his neck out, daring to name Jesus as the Messiah, being named himself as the rock upon whom the church would be built. Here, Peter pulls a “doubting Thomas” moment and asks for a sign--some assurance that it is truly Jesus walking toward that boat. “If it’s really you, prove it to me,” he seems to say. You’d think there would be an easier way to prove it than to ask Jesus to call him out of the boat. But that’s what Peter asks, and Jesus does. So, Peter plunges right in. At first, he is walking on top of that water. Just like Jesus! He stepped out in trust, but then faltered when his fear rushed in on the wind. And he began to sink.

I remember something like that once. I was roller-blading on the Northwestern University landfill, on the smooth asphalt paths. There was a bit of a hill and I swooped down, building up speed. It was a wonderful, euphoric feeling, just like flying. But then, in just a fraction of a second, my mind registered people coming toward me, and I thought, “Oh, oh, what do I do now?” And that was all it took. Over I went, scraping knees and elbows on the asphalt and feeling like a real jerk. I lost my focus, and I fell. Peter lost his focus on Jesus, and sank like a stone.

We might wonder about Peter’s act. Was it an act of faith, even though that faith wavered? Or was it impulsive, foolish? His companions did not jump out—they held on to their boat, bailing and keeping it afloat, trying to wait out the storm—doing what seemed to give them the best shot at making it to shore safely.

In our own world of storms, doubts, and acts of faith what are we called to do and to be? Both individually and as the church. Should we stay in the boat or risk jumping into the water. Each of these choices has its upside and its downside. Staying in could mean keeping on, holding the course, sticking together and not giving up. Or it could mean hanging on for dear life to the same old things, the things we have always done before. Stepping out of the boat could mean abandoning the community and going off on one’s own, or it could mean risking the unknown and frightening waters and daring to move in a new direction and following God’s call to a new future.

All that we find ourselves called to do carries these risks—vocational choices, marriage and other significant relationships, having a family, becoming part of a church community. The excitement and euphoria at the beginning inevitably is followed by unexpected situations and changes. It may be what’s hidden between the lines of a job description. It may be critical illness of self or other or economic hardships. At church it may be shifting or declining membership. We may find ourselves asking, “Is this really what I signed on for?”

I’ve had a goodly number of years of life experience and more than fifteen years in ordained ministry. But I am beginning to learn that Peter provides us an important lesson here. When we take a plunge, whatever it might be, we can only see a short way. We do not know the fullness of what will come. It is important to keep focused. Jesus said to Peter, “Why did you doubt?” The Greek word for doubt, “distazo,” translates as “vacillating”—being indecisive. If we vacillate between choices, allow our fears to take over, our own frail selves and abilities, we may sink. It’s really hard to take a partial plunge.

The only thing to do is to boldly plunge in and keep your eye on Jesus, remembering what Jesus said to the disciples when they took him for a ghost. “Take heart, it is I; do not be

afraid.” Take heart—be courageous. Fear not. It is not a promise that there will be no more storms, no more rough seas. Only that Jesus will be with us in those storms and in the times that we risk stepping out of the boat, even when we know we are likely to fall.

We are called to risk being vulnerable, even when we falter with storms of doubt. We do not need to be able to walk on water, to solve every problem and over-come every obstacle by ourselves. But we are called to live into the fullest lives we can, even when that involves risk and the unknown. And in doing so, we must remember that there is a hand that is held out to catch us. Focus on and trust in that hand. For there will be more—much more—than storms and winds and rain. There will be sunrises and birdsong and unimaginable beauty and joy. For stepping out and moving toward that hand is to live fully. And to know that we are never alone.

Amen.