

"Rising Above Your Circumstances"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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(Mt. 14:22-36)

Introduction.

There is an old joke that goes like this. Once there was a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi, and a Presbyterian pastor who all went fishing one day in a boat on a beautiful lake in western North Carolina. As the day went on, the Catholic priest said, "Boy, I'm thirsty. I think I'll go back to the shore and get a Coca Cola." He hopped out of the boat, walked across the water, got a coke out of the cooler on the shore, walked back across the water, and got into the boat again. The Presbyterian pastor was astonished.

Sometime later, the Jewish rabbi said, "You know, I'm thirsty, too. I think I'll go and get a coke." And he, too, got out of the boat, walked across the water, got a coke out of the cooler on the shore, walked back across the water, and got into the boat as well.

About this time the Presbyterian pastor became a bit agitated, and he thought to himself, "I've got just as much faith as these other two guys!" So, he said to the others, "I'm thirsty, too. I think I'll go and get a coke." The pastor got out of the boat, stepped onto the water, and sunk straight to the bottom of the lake. At this the Catholic priest turned to the Jewish rabbi and said, "Do you think we should tell him where the stumps in the water are?!"¹

Walking on water isn't an easy thing to accomplish, regardless of your denomination or faith, but we read about just such a miracle today here in the 14th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. As we take a look at this passage, there are three matters I want you to notice: 1) the dismissal of the crowd; 2) the faith and fear of Peter; and 3) the growing awareness of the disciples.

I. The Dismissal of the Crowd.

"Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd. After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray" (14:22,23).

Why would Jesus make the disciples get into a boat and go ahead of Him to the other side of the lake? **One reason** is because we learn in John's gospel that the people in the crowd were so enthusiastic about the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 that they wanted to make Jesus king by force. But Christ was aware that this didn't align with the Father's plan for Jesus' Messianic rule, and He also knew

that the disciples might want to go along with this political strategy. So, He removed the temptation and sent His disciples on ahead.

A second reason Jesus stayed behind was because He wanted to have the opportunity to say good-bye. Our Lord didn't just slip out the back to escape the crowd; He wasn't a hit-and-run kind of speaker. Rather, He lingered to dismiss the people. This speaks of a ministry of hospitality and graciousness, and it also serves as a reminder to us in this church that the ministry of Jesus needs to be a hospitable one.

And the **third and most important reason** Jesus dismissed the crowd and stayed behind was because He wanted to go up on a mountainside to pray. Do you remember what we said last Sunday about why Jesus and His disciples went by boat to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee in the first place? It was to get away for some rest, for prayer, and in the case of Jesus, also to grieve the loss of his cousin and friend, John the Baptist. While Christ was interrupted from His original goal for a time, He was determined to get the break He needed to be alone.

During His life on earth, Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer. He prayed in lonely places, on a hill, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed in the morning, in the evening, and sometimes all night. He prayed not only for Himself, but He also prayed for others – for the disciples, for the city of Jerusalem, for the Church universal, and even for the people who killed Him. Even now Jesus is making intercession for you and me in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

Picture, if you will, Jesus praying on the mountainside. The disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee. A storm had arisen, and they were straining at the oars. John's gospel tells us that the boat was 3 to 4 miles off the shore, about half-way across the width of the lake. Jesus can see them in their struggle, and He prays for them. What a comforting picture that is. When we find ourselves in the middle of a problem, when we strain at the oars of life, Jesus isn't unaware. He sees, and He cares, and as we shall see in this passage, He does something about it.

II. The Faith and Fear of Peter.

In ancient times the night was divided by the Romans into four different watches: 6-9 pm; 9 pm-midnight; midnight-3 am; and 3-6 am. The text tells us that Jesus came walking on the water during the fourth watch, between 3 and 6 am while it was still night. When He came near the boat, the disciples cried out in fear, thinking they had seen a ghost. But Jesus assured them that it was He, and there was no need for them to be afraid.

Encouraged by the Lord's words, Peter impulsively said, "If it's you, tell me to come out to you on the water." And the Lord responded, "Come." Peter was ready for action, and here we see the Lord encourage the boldness of the disciple.

He extends an invitation to Peter to join Him on the water. Remember, whenever we're ready to take a risk for Jesus, He is there to encourage our faith.

How far Peter got in his water expedition is unclear, but the passage tells us that at Jesus' command Peter walked on the water. Can you imagine the rush that experience must have been for Peter? Walking on the water, rising above the wind and the waves, defying the law of gravity? In the power of Christ, we can do amazing things, even rise above our circumstances. At the invitation of the Lord, we can venture out into uncharted waters and experience the exhilaration of seeing God do extraordinary things in our lives. Peter knew this first-hand.

But the ability to walk on the water didn't reside in Peter. That ability lays in Jesus. Sometimes when we accomplish something great, we begin to think that we're the ones who did it, that we're the ones who pulled it off, when all the while it was God working through us. The apostle Paul wrote, "*We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us*" (2 Cor. 4:7).

A. J. Gordon, the founder of Gordon Divinity School which later merged to form Gordon-Conwell Seminary, once told about time when he was out walking, and he looked across a field at a house. There beside the house he saw what looked like a man pumping vigorously on one of those old-fashioned hand pumps for water. As Gordon watched, the man continued to pump at a tremendous rate. He seemed absolutely tireless, pumping on and on, up and down, without ever slowing down in the slightest, much less stopping. It was truly a remarkable sight.

So, Gordon decided to take a closer look. As he got nearer, he could see that it wasn't a man at the pump at all. Rather, a wooden figure painted to look like a man was doing it. And the arm that was pumping so rapidly was hinged at the elbow, and the hand was wired to the pump handle. And furthermore, the water was pouring out not because the figure was pumping it, but because it was an artesian well and the water was actually pumping the man!²

When you see a person doing something great for God, recognize that it's the Holy Spirit working through that person, and not just their effort that is accomplishing so much. All we have to do is keep our hands on the handle, and keep up with Jesus as He pours out through us!

Things began to change rather quickly for the Peter, and the passage says that when he saw the wind he became afraid and began to sink, and he cried out, "Lord, save me!" He took his focus off the Lord and instead began to concentrate on the wind and the waves, and that's when he got into trouble. As long as his focus was on Jesus, as long as he riveted his gaze upon Christ, he could walk on water. It was only when his focus turned to the problems, the wind and the waves, that he began to sink.

Nothing changed in Peter's condition. Nothing was altered in the situation surrounding the disciple. The thing that changed was Peter's focus, and that made all the difference in the world. Peter's problem was that he began to believe that the world's winds are stronger than the Lord's words. How often are you and I like that? How often do we focus on the obstacle, the problem, or the struggle, and fail to focus on the Lord?

Fortunately for Peter, Jesus was right there, and Christ reached out His hand and caught the apostle as he was sinking into the water. Then the Lord said, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Had Peter been overconfident? Had he been too impulsive? No, Peter's problem was that he doubted, and he didn't trust in the word of the Lord enough to help him rise above his circumstances.

I don't think there is any passage in the NT in which Peter's character is more fully revealed than in this one. And yet when we read the story of Peter's faith and fear, we're reading our own story as well, aren't we? Peter's cry, "Lord, save me!" is the cry of both the daring disciple and the doubting disciple. The same man who said, "Lord, if it's you, invite me to come out to you on the water," also said, "Lord, save me!" when He doubted.

We're all like Peter, such a mixed bag of faith and fear. There are times when we're ready to conquer the world for Christ, and then there are other times when we shrink back and deny that we even know Him. And yet in spite of the fluctuations in our faith, despite the fact that we're so inconsistent in our walks, Jesus is always there to rescue us when we fall, when we sink in our doubt, and when we take our focus off of Him, just like Peter.

III. The Growing Awareness of the Disciples.

"And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly You are God's Son'" (14:32,33). Jesus had already demonstrated that He could use the elements of nature to walk on water. Now He proves that He's also able to cause them to stop the storm, and it leads the disciples to make a powerful affirmation. This declaration of the disciples is the first of its kind in the gospel, and it anticipates Peter's confession of faith two chapters later in Matthew 16.

The mystery of who Jesus is was beginning to percolate down, and before long the disciples would come to the conclusion that Jesus was truly the Messiah. It's doubtful that they had a clear understanding of what they were saying at the time. Their emotions were running high. They had just seen their fellow-disciple walk on water, begin to sink, and then be rescued by Jesus. They had just been straining at the oars against the wind and the waves, and then the storm immediately died down when Christ got into the boat. And they had just seen

Jesus feed 5,000 people. Who can do things like this except someone who had the power of God?

The effect of all this was that the disciples fell at the feet of Jesus, and they worshipped Him in humble adoration. And our Lord accepted their worship. There wasn't any attempt to prevent them from doing this, and Jesus accepted their worship as an appropriate response.

Anyone who questions the fact that Jesus claimed to be God should look at passages like this one. Later on in the NT we read of Cornelius who fell at the feet of Peter and worshipped the apostle, but Peter told Cornelius, "*Get up for I myself am also just a man*" (Acts 10:26). John, the author of the book of Revelation, records that he fell down in order to worship an angel-guide, but the angel gave a similar warning the apostle (Rev. 22:8,9). However, here and elsewhere in the gospels Jesus willingly accepted the worship of the disciples, and His silence affirms the declaration that He was indeed the Son of God.

Worship is the only appropriate response whenever we realize that we're in the presence of the holy, and on our knees is where we belong. George Adam Smith tells the story that once he was climbing the Weisshorn Mountain above the Zermatt Valley in the Swiss Alps with a guide on a stormy day, and they made the ascent on the sheltered side of the mountain. Reaching the top, and exhilarated by the thought of the view before him, Smith ran to the summit of the mountain and was almost blown off by the wind. The guide caught hold of him and pulled him down to the ground and solemnly said, "On your knees, sir! You are safe here only on your knees."³ That's true when you're on the peak of a mountain in the Alps, but it's also true when in the presence of Jesus.

Conclusion.

As we close there is one more verse from this passage that I want highlight. It occurs after the Lord walks on the water and approaches the boat. The disciples think they have seen a ghost and cry out in fear. The response of Jesus is such an important word for us to hear. "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid*" (14:27). The two Greek words that are translated "It is I," can literally be translated "I am." It's the same word-name God gave for Himself to Moses in the wilderness when He said, "*Tell them 'I am' has sent me*" (Ex. 4).

Take courage! It is "I AM." Don't be afraid. What a great word of encouragement for all of us to hear today, whatever our circumstances may be.

- Are you in the middle of a marriage that's really struggling? "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
- Have you recently seen the doctor, and he told you the disturbing news? "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

- Are you worried about your kids, the friends they're choosing, their lack of effort in school, or the ways they've disappointed you? "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
- Have you been passed over at work or school and someone else got that promotion or recognition you deserved? "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
- Have you recently lost a loved one, and you feel a hole in the heart the size of Texas, and you wonder how in the world you're going to make it through the next week? "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Wherever you are, whatever your circumstances may be, Jesus is there, and He is never so near as when we need Him the most. Let these encouraging words of the Savior wash over you and assure you of His presence and His love as you endure the storms of your life.

I read the story of a passenger in the backseat of the taxicab who tapped the driver on the shoulder, and said, "Hey Buddy."

The driver screamed hysterically and almost lost control of the cab, nearly hitting a bus, jumping the curb and stopping just inches from a huge plate-glass window. For a few moments, everything was silent. Then the driver said, "Man, you scared the daylights out of me!"

"I'm sorry," said the passenger. "I didn't realize a tap on the shoulder would frighten you so much."

The driver replied, "Oh, it's not your fault. Today is my first day driving a cab. For the past 25 years I've been driving a hearse for a funeral home, and I just forgot where I was."

That cab driver could benefit from the comforting words of Jesus, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Maybe these words will help us, too. Amen.

¹Source unknown.

²Source unknown.

³J. W. Roberts, in *The Christian World*.