

## Matthew 14:22-33

You really should have just left earlier. You knew you had to walk home, and you knew that as the weather was getting colder, the days were getting shorter. But your house is just a few blocks away, and you had been having such a great time... you're tired now, though, and it really is time to head home. Now, on your way through the dark and cold, you notice some worrying shadows following you. Maybe it's nothing, just other people out for a stroll... late on a dark, cloudy night? You feel your pulse and your thoughts beginning to race. You're really starting to wish you lived in a nicer part of town, when you feel a hand on your shoulder. "Don't worry. I got this." And your friend, who stands a full foot taller than you and practically lives in the gym, walks with you the rest of the way home. Afraid? Not on that night. Why not? It's obvious. Your muscle-bound friend has just promised that he'll take care of you, and you know from experience that this large man is up to the task. Nothing is going to hurt you tonight; you're confident.

Jesus' disciples saw a worrying shadow in the night, too, from where they were on their boat one night. And they had left Jesus behind on the shore. But in the midst of their fear, Jesus came to them and said, "Take Courage!" He encourages his disciples and us to believe his promises to help and save, and to trust his power to make good on those promises.

It had been a crazy day. For Jesus, it meant a long day healing and teaching huge crowds by the Sea of Galilee. For the disciples, it meant witnessing an amazing demonstration of Jesus' love and power. Because when it started to get dark and they pointed out to Jesus that nobody really had any food, he simply created some out of some kid's leftovers—and fed over five thousand people like it was nothing. What a miracle! What a faith boost!

Now Jesus was ready to send the crowds away, and he sent the disciples away, too, to start the boat trip to the other side of the lake without him while he headed up a nearby hill by himself to pray. And from there, where he was still praying, hours later, he could also see everything that was happening below him on the lake.

See, the disciples were about halfway across the lake, three or four miles. That's a decent distance, but they had been at it almost all night, and they should have arrived at their destination by this point. But the wind was against them, and even though some of the disciples were professional fishermen and quite competent on the sea, the boat was not making much headway through the crashing waves and whipping wind.

And it is in these circumstances, to these tired, likely crabby, men, with wind-soaked clothes and worn bodies, that Jesus came. He simply walked out to them, right over those tumbling waves that were slowing the twelve guys in the boat so much. What a beautiful sight! In the midst of the chaos, out of the darkness, came the very figure of God, materializing out of the night, come to help his people!

But the disciples didn't get it. No, they freaked out. Wind and waves and long nights, fine. They could handle those. But ghosts on the lake? Nope. They were terrified. You'd think that when they saw something impossible happening, their minds would go right to the one person they knew who could do the impossible. Especially after the day they'd had, it seems obvious to us now that their Master, the one who had just gotten done feeding thousands from nothing, would be the same man walking toward

them on the lake. But their fear and exhaustion got the better of them, and they didn't even think of Jesus.

And honestly, can we blame them? Well, yes. But I'm betting the worries of your life have pushed Jesus out of your mind a time or two, too, just like mine have. Can any of us say that every single time an illness or an unexpected vehicle expense or whatever new bad or inconvenient thing has happened, we've always thought to ourselves "Oh, that's right. Jesus is here, and he will take care of me. There's nothing to worry about." Even after the Lord gives us the strength to endure and even triumph in trial after trouble, we still find ourselves doubting, looking everywhere except to the right place for help.

At least the disciples recognized there was nothing they could do. They simply cried out in helpless fear. "It's a ghost!" Immediately, Jesus came to them with his reassuring word. There's no wait or hesitation. He did not let them sit in suspense until they realized that it was him. No, Jesus knew what these people needed. He spoke to their fear with his perfect word: "Take Courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Jesus comes to us, too. He comes with words of comfort when we are afraid or mourning or guilty. When your relative is sick or dying, or when you just don't see a way out of your financial situation, or when your sin seems so great that you don't even want to think about it, Jesus has these same words to say to you. When Jesus says "Take Courage," it's because he has come to help his people with whatever mess they're in. Jesus says "It's me" and reminds us that he is the God who loves and cares for us, not some ghost with no interest in mortal life. When he says "Don't be afraid," he points us to all the promises in his Scriptures like "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Is 41:10) or "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19). These promises are life for the Christian. When life gets hard, or scary, or painful, look to the Bible for these precious promises. God's Word is an endless ocean of comfort, its promises more abundant and diverse and beautiful than a brilliant fall forest.

But the best part about the promise is that Jesus is strong enough to back them up. After all, comforting words don't mean much in a dark alleyway unless they are spoken by someone who can actually follow through on his promises. And Jesus does have the power to make good on his word. As if walking on water were not enough of a demonstration, he shows his disciples even more proof of that power when Peter gets a crazy idea.

Remember, there's still a stiff wind. The waves are still rocking the boat. What gave Peter the idea or even the boldness to say this, I have no idea, but as soon as Jesus made it clear who he was, Peter said, "It's you, Jesus? Great! Can I come, too?" And Jesus didn't tell him to sit down or be quiet. He simply said, "Come," inviting his disciple to trust in his power.

And Peter did. Whatever else there is to say about Peter, this much is true: he had enough faith to get out of the boat. And for one beautiful verse, everything was great. This is the power of faith in God! But sadly, it did not last. Peter took his eyes off his Savior, and as his mind began to register what he was actually doing, he became afraid, and he doubted, and he sank. But even in this moment of doubt, there is something we can learn from Peter. Because as he sank, Peter remembered his Savior and called out to him, "Lord, save me!"

And again, Jesus came to him, not with mere words but with power and action. He responded immediately and lovingly to Peter, who had gotten himself into this mess. The first thing he did was reach out and catch his sinking disciple, and single-handedly he lifted him to safety. Jesus came to Peter in power, and despite Peter's doubt, Jesus used that power to save his life.

Before they got back into the boat, Jesus asked Peter a convicting question: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" He wasn't asking for information. Jesus was pointing out Peter's sin and calling him to repentance, and in this way showing even more love for his disciple. Jesus cared about more than Peter's body and physical life. His primary concern was Peter's soul. In fact, the entire encounter had been designed to strengthen all the disciples' faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

As Jesus got back into the boat, the rest of the disciples, who had seen the whole thing, worshiped him: "Truly you are the Son of God." They finally got it, for the moment at least.

Do we?

We focus on ourselves and our personal problems so much that we doubt even in the face of God's clear promises and power. How are we any better than Peter, since we have the clear promises and power of God so readily available to us and yet we still doubt? My brothers and sisters, we need to repent just as much as Peter did. When a financial problem springs up in my life, why do I exhaust all of my other options and resources trying to figure out what I can do before I even think about going to God in prayer? Why do we worry about the future, which we cannot control, when we know the one who can control it? What can we do to fix this problem of constant doubt every time something goes differently than what we had planned? Nothing, it's true. By ourselves, we are as helpless and doubt-filled as the twelve disciples were.

Take courage, my friends. Continue to look to God as your source of faith and comfort. He gives you so many promises, and he follows through on every single one. God himself pulls you up out of the crashing waves of your doubt when you sink, strengthening faith through his word. God himself gave us Holy Scripture to tell us all how his Son suffered and died for the sins of the world. And in the sacraments, Jesus promises that his sacrifice is for you personally. You and your salvation is why he died.

And Jesus doesn't make empty promises. He shows us his power as proof. That's one reason he did so many miracles, and finally, that's why he rose from the dead—to back up his promise of forgiveness. In the ultimate display of power, he defeated death itself from the inside out, and by his resurrection he proves to all believers that they—you—will also be raised to life eternal. Your Jesus is the God of death and life! Is there anything he won't do for you? Is there any promise he can't keep? Of course not.

We are comforted by a strong friend in a dark alleyway because we have reassuring promises from him, and because we have seen that he is able to make good on his promises. In the same way, immerse yourself in Jesus' promises of forgiveness and strength, and know that he has the strength to make good on them. You can rest in that comfort. My brothers and sisters, take courage even in the worst trials of this broken world, because Jesus is with you in his promises and with his saving power. Amen.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through... The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. Amen. (1 Thess. 5:23a,24)