Sermon, August 13, 2023

Matthew 14: 22-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

On Friday I asked the Bible study participants what was the biggest risk they had ever taken. One couple went riding in a hot air balloon while another rode in a helicopter over the Grand Canyon. Some recalled times when they could have taken a risk, as in that helicopter ride, but chose to remain on solid ground.

During the mission trips I took to Guatemala, we were always given one free day to do anything we wanted. One year I went to the Chocolate Museum where we got to hear about the history of chocolate and finished the afternoon by making our own chocolate bars.

Another year I chose to walk around the historic section of Antigua by myself to explore old churches and other buildings. That was a bit more of a risk, being alone in a foreign city with limited Spanish skills.

The biggest risk was the year I went zip-lining down the side of a mountain. That was more of a “take your life in your hands” or in this case in the harness and wire holding you many feet off the ground type of risk.

Think of your biggest risk. Maybe it was some activity like these or maybe it was something like moving to a new town or quitting a job before you had the next one lined up.

The disciples have already taken a big risk in Matthew’s story. They chose to follow Jesus, an itinerant preacher and teacher who only said…follow me.

In today’s story, Jesus hangs back after the feeding of the 5000. He has his disciples get in the boat they arrived in and head off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. This would be nothing too risky for them, even though Jesus did not go with them. Most of them were old hands at guiding boats on the lake in their previous profession as fishermen.

Jesus sends the crowds back home. He finally has some time alone. Or so it seems. While Jesus is experiencing a calm time to pray, the disciples are experiencing something quite different.

Out there on the sea, a storm has come up. Their boat is being battered by the wind and the waves. They can’t make it to land because the wind keeps pushing their boat back into the sea away from the shore.

The sea was still raging when the morning watch began, about 3 a.m. As dawn was breaking in the early morning, the disciples look out across the waters.

It was not another boat. It wasn’t a break in the storm. It was someone walking towards them! There among the waves is what looks like a person coming towards them. Surely it can’t be a person walking on the water. There is no other explanation than it is a ghost.

No wonder the disciples are terrified and cry out in fear. Not only do they have the wind and waves to contend with, now a ghost is after them! They’ve seen ghosts or spirits before on their journey with Jesus. Spirits are usually demons, so this is not a good thing walking towards them.

Jesus hears their fearful cries and calls out to them. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. Jesus tells them to have courage. There is nothing to be afraid of. It’s him.

Peter is ready for some proof. What he is seeing and hearing is just impossible. He hopes that if it is a ghost, it would not tell him to step out of the boat onto the water. But if it is Jesus, he is to order him to do it. What better way for Jesus to prove it is he than to command Peter to meet him on the water.

Jesus speaks one word. Come. That is enough for Peter to ignore all laws of nature. People may float on water, but we are not made to walk on water. Even so, Peter takes what is often called a leap of faith.

In the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Indiana has made a pilgrimage of sorts to find the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. The end of his search brings him to a series of trials he must pass to get him to the grail. With each step he takes over and under and around the obstacles, he gets closer to the cave where the grail is kept.

The last obstacle is a deep abyss. There is no bridge and there is no way to jump the distance. He can’t even use his trusty bullwhip to swing across. He must take a leap of faith, stepping out into the void.

As the audience held its breath when first seeing the movie, he takes a breath, holds it and puts out his foot. It comes down on a previously invisible stone bridge, allowing him to cross to the cave. Shocked and thrilled to have made it, he turns at the last moment and throws a handful of dirt and pebbles back across the walkway.

The dirt remains on the again invisible walkway. I always love that part. Even though he took the leap of faith and survived, he needs just a little more proof that the walkway is still there. And will be there when he returns.

Peter takes a huge risk and gets out of the boat. He is able to walk on water, too! How would you describe yourself when taking a risk?

Are you cautious and want to hedge your bets? Are you calculating and want to play the odds? How about procrastinating, putting it off as long as you can? What about being apprehensive to the point that you become too scared to move at all?

Peter is his usual impulsive self. He weighed what Jesus had to say. It only took that one word for him to leave the relative safety of the boat. He didn’t check the depth of the water. He didn’t say he would wait until the wind died down or the waves were calmer.

Peter obeys the command of Jesus to come, just as he obeyed Jesus’ call of…follow me. He goes along fine…until! He sees the wind still beating up the waves and begins to panic. He loses his focus, or at least his focus is no longer on Jesus but himself.

He doesn’t call out for a life jacket. He doesn’t turn and try to run back to the boat. He doesn’t start to do the back stroke. He cries out to Jesus.

His call of “Lord, save me” is enough for Jesus to reach out and catch him. Jesus says to him…you of little faith, why did you doubt?

Author Rob Bell writes that Peter lost faith in himself. Jesus knew he could walk on the water with him, but Peter didn’t let his faith carry him. He doubted what was possible even when Jesus was with him.

He gets terribly insecure once he’s out of the boat. The wind is more powerful than he is. The wind distracts him from the one who commanded him to come in the first place. And he begins to sink.

When I was a young teenage, I tried to roller skate. I was not good at it. I continue to be horrible at anything that makes me feel out of control. I do not ski or ice skate. I even hate to walk on ice. Where some people can relax and glide across slippery surfaces, I tense up. The feeling of sliding makes me panic. I become immobilized. For sure, I look for someone to come and rescue me.

Once, when I was a young teenager, a friend of mine and her father took me along when they went skating at a local rink. He knew I was nervous about it, so he held my hand as we rolled rather tentatively around the rink. I got a little more comfortable and we went a little faster.

I guess he thought I was getting the hang of it because he let go. Big mistake! Without his guiding hand and assurance that I was doing fine, I panicked, became all off balance and fell, taking him with me.

Left on my own, even beginning to see that I could skate without crashing into a wall or falling on my, well, you know what, I lost faith in myself. I needed the hand of someone else to keep me on my feet.

Peter also needs Jesus’ helping hand. If Peter had not been distracted by his own fears, he would have been able to complete his water walk to Jesus.

Jesus asks him why did he doubt? Jesus was right there, right by his side. His very presence was holding Peter above the waves. Jesus immediately saved him when he began to sink.

Jesus was already walking on the water…what did Peter think Jesus was going to do? Get pulled under like that poor father did when I took him out with me on the skating rink? No, Jesus is there to rescue him.

Peter and Jesus continue on the water together and get into the boat. Then the winds cease. Jesus doesn’t calm the wind nor waves when Peter leaves the boat. He calms them when they are both in the boat together.

We have winds in our lives. All those things that go wrong may batter us just like the waves did to the disciples’ boat. It’s hard not to focus on the wind rather than the one who walks with us in that wind.

Our winds are not going to cease until we reach the other side with Jesus. Until we come into our resurrection life, we will continue to take risks that may or may not work out for us. Life will still have the ability to buffet us.

The winds of life though do not have to defeat us. As Paul wrote to the Romans, we are more than conquerors. We can have faith in ourselves. That faith is not in our own capabilities, but in the one who reaches out and keeps our heads above water.

We have faith because Jesus has called us in the midst of the winds to come to him. With him, we may take heart and not be afraid.

This is, as Paul also told the Romans, the word of faith that we proclaim. The Lord is near to us, on our lips and in our hearts. We call on the Lord to save us and he does. We call on Jesus because Jesus first called us with a simple word…come. Come and follow me and I will give you life. Amen.