

The story of Jesus walking on the water / calming the wind and waves follows the story of the feeding of the 5000 thousand in Matthew's Gospel... and in Mark, and John, too. Although these stories vary in their content and depth, all three Gospel writers agree on one thing: they all share the ancient understanding of the sea as "*the place where dark forces dwell... the place where chaos still reigns on earth.*" So, when Jesus walks across the stormy Sea of Galilee... he proves his power over the forces of chaos / the dark forces of the deep... as well as the wild winds and crashing waves above—he proves he is Lord over all!

Interestingly, only Matthew includes **PETER** in his story... which is, perhaps, *why* his version of the story is my favorite. There is something so familiar about **PETER**. Of all the disciples, *he* is the one we *know* the best (and perhaps the one we can relate to the most). What do we know about him from the Gospel stories?

Well, **PETER** is the first disciple called (he seems to be one of Jesus' favorites, *if* Jesus can have favorites); and he is the one who speaks, most often, for the rest (sometimes before he thinks). Remember: It is **PETER** who boldly proclaims Jesus' identity as "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*"... BUT who does not *understand* what it means—for Jesus... *and* for them. And it is **PETER** whom Jesus calls "the rock" of the church... but whom Jesus also calls "Satan" because he is NOT on the side of God, but of humans. **PETER** is one whom Jesus asks to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane (and who promptly falls asleep); and, sadly, what he's remembered for most: **PETER** is the one who swears he will *never* deny Jesus... BUT then, before the cock crows, does deny him... 3 times!

And in our story today, it is **PETER** who asks Jesus if he can "*come to [him] on the water*"... and it is **PETER** who ends up sinking like a rock...

Over and over again in the Gospel stories, **PETER** is the disciple who speaks up and takes risks... who exhibits great faith but, as often as not, falls short. Through it all, he never gives up. He keeps getting back up and brushing himself off... to try again.

And that's *why* I like **PETER**. He is real... a lot like us! He is full of faith one minute... full of doubt and fear the next.

\*\*\*\*\*

Exhausted after the miraculous feeding of the 5000+ (and still grieving the gruesome murder of his cousin, John the Baptist), Jesus makes his disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to other side... while he dismisses the people... and then goes off by himself to pray.

During the night, a storm blows in... and the disciples spend the better part of the night battling *the dark forces of the sea*—being battered by the wind and crashing waves.

In the early morning hours, Jesus appears to them, walking across the sea... "*It's a ghost!*" they cry out in fear. But immediately, Jesus speaks to assure them, "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*"

Before he can climb into the boat with them, to calm and reassure them more, **PETER** opens his mouth...

He wants “proof” that it really *is* Jesus – “*Lord, if it’s really you... command me to come to you on the water.*” **Prove** that you are *who* you say you are... let me join you out there on the water... **then I’ll believe...**

“*Come, then...*” Jesus says. And **PETER** confidently steps out of the boat. He takes one step... and then another. He’s doing fine until... until he remembers the whipping wind and the crashing waves and the depth of the sea... and he loses heart. In his fear, he takes his eyes off Jesus... and he immediately begins to sink... like a rock. “*Lord, save me!*” he cries out... and Jesus does, of course—immediately reaching out his hand to catch him... to pull him up out of the cold, dark water.

“*You of little faith... why did you doubt?*” Jesus chides him. And then they both climb into the boat... and the storm stops... and the disciples who *stayed* in the boat worship Jesus, confessing: “*Truly you are the Son of God!*”

\*\*\*\*\*

Why did Jesus chide **PETER**? Was it because **PETER** let his fears literally sink him? Or was it because **PETER** climbed out of the boat in the first place?

Notice: Jesus doesn’t ask **PETER**, “Why were you afraid?” *That’s* what we’d *expect* since we are told that when **PETER** saw the wind, he was “afraid.”

Instead, Jesus asks him about **doubt**... and I want to focus a bit on that **doubt**, today... because the Greek word that Matthew uses for **doubt** here is only used twice in the whole Bible, both times in Matthew. [Everywhere else the idea of “doubt” arises, a different Greek word is used.]

The kind of **doubt** that Matthew refers to here... is NOT the kind of doubt that comes from *fear*. It’s a more logical / rational **doubt**... that seems to be tied to the person of Jesus... to *who* he is.

→ Is Jesus who he says he is? Is he what he appears to be?

The only other place in the NT where we find this particular Greek word for **doubt** is in Matthew 28. The disciples are gathered with the resurrected Jesus... and right before Jesus gives the Great Commission, we are told that “*they worshiped him; but some doubted.*”

Here (in chapter 14) and in chapter 28 – are the only places in this Gospel where we find **doubt** and worship so closely connected... 2 sides of the same coin. And I think that says something!

So what was it that **PETER** **doubted**? I think the answer is found in that little word, “if.” “*If it is you,*” **PETER** says to Jesus, “*then command me to come to you.*”

“**If**” —you can hear **doubt** in that word, can’t you?! There are only a couple of other times in Matthew when someone speaks to Jesus through the word “**If**” — 1) In Matthew 4, when the devil tempts Jesus, “*If you are the Son of God...*” – prove it! – “*Command these stones to become loaves of bread*” ... “*Throw yourself down*” from the pinnacle of the temple... 2) And then in Matthew 27, when some in the crowd deride Jesus, saying, “*If you are the Son of God...*” – prove it! – “*...come down from the cross.*”

Here, Peter says, “*If you are who you say you are, Jesus*” – prove it! – “*command me to do what only you can do... command me to come to you on the water!*”

And although Jesus commands him to come (as Peter asks)... when he sinks, Jesus chides him for his **doubt**. Maybe what Jesus is really asking is, “What are you doing out of the boat in the first place, **PETER?**”

“*You of little faith... why did you **doubt?***” These are words that none of us want to hear... especially from Jesus, our Lord. And yet, if we’re honest, they *are* the very words that we ask ourselves on a pretty regular basis: **Why do I doubt?** *Why do I doubt as much or more as I believe? Why don’t I have more faith? Why is it so hard to believe that Jesus is who he says he is?*

Deep down, we know that we *should* trust Jesus... BUT no matter how hard we try, we get distracted... afraid... overwhelmed by the wind and waves all around us.

We believe that we are held in God’s loving hands... BUT then something “bad” happens—a loved one is diagnosed with cancer / a global pandemic hits and 100s of thousands get sick, many die / the economy takes a downward turn / jobs are lost and families struggle—and **our faith falters... doubt takes over... and we begin to sink...**

We believe that God is present with us (as God has promised to be)... and that God is at work in the world around us and in our lives... BUT terrible / awful things keep happening—just read the newspaper / watch the news! **Will the storms ever end!**

We pray for direction and guidance... we, like Elijah, listen for the reassuring voice of God... BUT no voice comes – only the sound of sheer silence... and **the waves crash against our legs...** and **we begin to sink.**

**Why do we doubt? Why do we doubt the presence / power of the One who conquers the storms?**

*...because* the sea of life is so big, and we are so small... *because* the winds and waves that batter us are so powerful, and we feel so weak... *because* so much of life is out of our control, and we feel so helpless in its grip.

**Why do we doubt?** *...because* even when we **do** have faith (and we DO!)... it doesn’t seem like “*enough*” to carry us through...

Like **PETER**, we have **faith** AND we have **doubt**... we trust Jesus AND we need reassurance / “proof”... we walk with Jesus AND we *fail* – we take a few steps and then take our eyes off Jesus AND we begin to sink... and we cry out, “*Lord, save me!*”... AND the good news is... he does – again and again – he “*reaches out his hand and catches [us].*” When we falter / when we fail... when we sink down in *fear* and **doubt**, Jesus, our Savior, is there to catch us... to pull us up out of the dark waters that threaten to consume us... to bring us back to safety (and community) of the boat...

I think I like this story about **PETER**... because it’s a story about me / us... because like **PETER**, we are NOT always confident—we do NOT have “perfect” faith... like **PETER**, we listen to and *follow* Jesus AND we fall away in *fear*... we *walk* with him AND we *sink down into the depths*... we *believe* AND we **doubt**.

**Faith** and **doubt**—they both exist in us at the same time: buoying us up AND dragging us down... giving us courage AND feeding our fears... supporting us on life’s rough seas AND sinking us like rocks. That’s WHY we NEED Jesus – our Savior / our Lord...

Our fears and our doubts—they can paralyze us at times... BUT they are also what make us cry out to Jesus, “*Lord, save me!*” So, they’re not all bad are they?! Our *fears* and our **doubts**—they remind us *who* we are... and *whose* we are—named and claimed in the waters of baptism.

When we **doubt** (and sink down in *fear*)—as **PETER** did... as we all do—we can be assured that Jesus is there to save us from drowning... and to walk with us back, again, to the safety (and community) of the boat (the church)... where we—ALL of us who are in the boat—worship him... and once again, believe... “*Truly, you are who you say you are... Truly, you are the Son of God!*”