

“Take Heart, It Is I”

Matthew 14:22-33

Richard C. Allen

August 10, 2008

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

The scene Matthew paints is a desperation scene. It is a few hours before dawn, the darkest hours of the night. The disciples are in a boat far from the shore. A wind has come up against them, driving them even further away from land. Waves are spilling over the sides. Some disciples are rowing frantically; some are bailing the water; some are praying. All are scared to death. The last thing they need now is to see a ghost!

They strain their eyes looking for the horizon, hoping to see some sign of the sun rising, some evidence of the storm lifting. And all they see is an unidentifiable shape walking, splashing across the waters. They assume...it's a ghost! Oh dread! They tremble! They quake! They cry out in fear! Can you hear them? Can you picture them? Can you smell their anxiety? Have you ever been where they are? Are you there now? Is it your darkest hour of the night?

The mysterious, ghostly figure speaks, **“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”** But they are afraid. Of course they are afraid!

Everything they know about boats and weather and navigation tells them they are in real trouble. They hear and recognize the voice of their teacher, but they are gripped by fear. Danger is all around them. They ask for proof. “If it really is you, and not a ghost,” says Peter, “command me to come to you on the water, then I’ll believe it’s really you.” They want to believe, but they are afraid to believe. They hold back. They are caught in the dilemma between belief and unbelief.

I have always treasured this scene because it invites us into that place of dilemma, into that awkward place between belief and unbelief. This is a creative place, a place where spiritual growth is likely, a place where the imagination is welcome. It's a teachable place. More often than not, the twelve disciples find themselves in this very place.

Early on in my ministry, I attended a pastors' camp where the advertised topic card was Confirmation education. I signed up immediately because, though I had been confirmed and had been in a confirmation program in 9th grade, I really didn't know where to begin teaching such a class. In the opening session, Jack Seville handed out a single piece of paper with an open-ended sentence at the top. We were to complete the sentence in as many ways as we could possibly imagine. Written on the top of that paper were these words, "I believe _____, but sometimes I wonder _____." I tell you we were up half the night filling in those blank spaces!

+I believe in the goodness of humanity, but sometimes I wonder about murderers and rapists.

+I believe in life after death, but sometimes I wonder if there's really a place with pearly gates and a quiz with three questions administered by Saint Peter.

+I believe love never ends, but sometimes I wonder what happens to love when there's a divorce.

+I believe all things are possible with God, but sometimes I wonder whether God knows that this is so.

On and on it went like that, into the wee hours of the night. We were two dozen young ministers invited into that place of dilemma, that place between belief and unbelief.

I will be forever grateful for that pastors' retreat with Jack Seville because it helped me to see so clearly that it is in our times of dilemma that we are most likely to encounter the Christ calling out to us: **Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.**

Jesus Christ comes to Peter at that awkward time when Peter wants to believe but is afraid to believe. And Jesus simply invites him to take the risk; go ahead, believe! Step out on faith! This is a classic moment in our understanding of what faith is all about! Does Peter ask to see Jesus' photo ID before stepping out into the deep water? Does he ask for some proof of identity before taking the plunge? Or does he just decide to believe what his heart is telling him, and to see what difference believing will make?

People are always asking me if this really happened. Do I take this story literally? I have no idea whether this particular story took place exactly as Matthew describes it. But I do know this: faith that holds back, that waits until all the evidence is in is no faith at all. Faith that is life-giving is faith that responds to the invitation, 'come and follow me.' Faith that is life-giving requires courage more than it requires evidence.

I suppose I could have circumnavigated the pastor's retreat on Confirmation education and gone directly to this story of Peter in the boat. It's really the ideal story for anyone in that in-between place, anyone in their sophomore year, anyone who identifies with Peter's dilemma; trying to decide whether this mysterious person we've been hearing about all our lives is really the savior of the world or whether he's some kind of a ghost.

The actors and actresses who win the annual stage awards are the ones who succeed in getting inside the mind of the character they're portraying. The actress, Anne Bancroft, for example, who plays Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker*, gets my vote for best dramatic performance of all time.

She just gets it...what it must have taken to be the live-in teacher for Helen Keller. The food-throwing scene at the dining room table stands out above all the other scenes. What is required by the Annie Sullivan character is a belief that this little girl, blind and deaf from a high fever, is made in the image of God, and deserves to be loved in such a way that self-esteem takes root and self-respect blossoms. To play the part of Annie Sullivan requires an actress who is at ease in that place of spiritual dilemma, who believes that all things are possible; yet, wonders sometimes how it can be so. She has no idea what she's getting herself into when she gets off the train and arrives at the Keller house, but she believes in and acts upon what her heart is calling her to do. It's as if she has read and knows this story of Peter stepping out of the boat into the troubled sea. It's as if she sees herself in him. Peter's story and her story converge. And that is the place where God is most real.

Matthew's greatest hope is that the readers of his Gospel will be award winning actors and actresses, that we will all get inside the mind of Peter as he looks over the prow of the boat, looks out into the storm, sees a mysterious presence, and hears the invitation to step out on faith. Matthew hopes that sooner or later we'll all be able to identify with Peter; we'll all see the danger, yet take the risk, believing in the One who says, **"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."**

In the greatest of hope, amen!