

May we hear the words of Christ, know the mind of Christ, enter the heart of Christ. Amen.

I have never learned to water ski. There are two reasons for this. The first time I ever tried it I was a child, and I was in the Congo River, and our host told us there had been hippos and crocodiles seen in that part of the river recently, so I was just a little nervous about being in there at all. But more than that, I just didn't feel I belonged on top of the water. I couldn't get past the physics of it. Even when I tried it in a nice, safe lake, I couldn't get past the strangeness of being on water I was supposed to be in. How can we believe what we cannot conceive?

Certainly nobody in that boat on that storm-tossed sea that night could believe a flesh-and-blood person could come strolling to them on the water. These were experienced fishermen, and the Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden squalls. Even so, as they battled in the dark against the wind, this storm had them scared. But not as much as the sight of someone walking toward them on top of the water!

These guys had been on an emotional roller-coaster. First, they heard about King Herod's capricious beheading of John the Baptist, Then they set off with Jesus on a retreat that was interrupted by a vast throng of people clamoring for Jesus' teaching and healing. That turned into a miraculous picnic in which thousands are fed with five loaves and two fish that never seem to run out... there are even leftovers. Then Jesus leaves them alone to go off by himself to pray – they don't know how he's going to get across the lake in time to meet them.

They're still trying to sort out just what happened back there with the loaves and the 5,000, when they have this strong wind to contend with. And then – when I don't think they could have taken one more mind-bending thing, here comes Jesus walking to them on the water like it's asphalt. Okay – so he could heal people instantly from incurable conditions, including death.... and yes, he had a way of multiplying food and turning water into wine... and he had commanded even wind and waves to be calm and they were – But how could he control the molecules of water, to make them solid?

No matter how many miracles Jesus did, his followers could never anticipate the next miraculous thing he did. Each one came as a shock.

Isn't it the same with us? No matter how many times God answers our prayers, sometimes in miraculous ways, we never quite expect the next amazing thing? I'm always surprised – and I ought to know better.

I have seen God heal people in ways that were not medically possible, but I'm still afraid to believe the next time, because it doesn't always happen. I let what I perceive to be “no's” overwhelm the many “yes's.”

But faith is about believing when you can't see – once you've seen, it's knowledge. We are called to be people of faith – that's what the world needs from us.

We have enough evidence of God's power in our lives to trust God – but we often let the evidence of this world overwhelm what we know in our hearts.

And the “world” has been throwing up a lot of “evidence” lately –

like those disciples, we've taken some hits, and they seem to keep coming.

Our whole lives turned upside-down in March when the pandemic hit;

we're getting used to that, and the economy starts sliding – and then

social unrest as the demand for racial justice and equity finally got urgent...

We have to work differently, educate our children differently, worship differently...

That's a lot of storminess. And here comes Jesus, strolling across the water to us.

We really start following Jesus when we let our faith in what we cannot see be stronger than our doubt in what we can.

Our faith in what we cannot see – the power of God all around us and in us – needs to be stronger than our doubt in what we can.

Living our faith means constantly asserting the power of God in the face of the world's definitions of reality.

If we really want to see God work we have to jump in. Peter jumped in.

Peter saw Jesus out there, and he just climbed over the side and felt the water under his feet. He kept his eyes right on Jesus and took a step toward him.

And then another. And another. He was almost at his side –

and then some thought intruded. It's always our thoughts that get us.

Maybe he thought, “How will I get back to the boat?” “This is impossible, isn't it?”

And then he noticed how bad the wind was, and look how choppy that water is,

and he took his eyes off Jesus, because the next thing you know,

he was sinking. Sinking fast in a storm-tossed sea. You ever felt that way?

I'm grateful Matthew tells us the whole story. Not just the part about Peter getting out of the boat, not just that exercise of amazing faith, but of the doubt that came right after the faith, and the sinking effect it had. Because our doubts – real and natural as they are – do have a sinking effect. We can't will ourselves not to have them, and this story reminds us that they're inevitable. But we don't have to give our doubts the last word. We can call out, "Jesus! Save me!" And he'll be there. That's a promise.

Peter did. And right away, Jesus was there, grabbing his hand and pulling him up. And he just said, very gently, "You of little faith – why did you doubt?" "You were finally doing it, what I've been trying to teach you! You just believed me and acted on it. You just did it. You got out of the boat. You walked on water! Why did you stop?" He stopped because he stopped focusing on Jesus. That'll get us every time.

Walking on water means putting your trust in something that looks insubstantial... Pretty good metaphor for living by faith... to the world this story of ours, with this living but invisible Risen Lord Jesus seems ludicrous, as insubstantial as you can get. But when we get our feet wet, we find it's the most solid substance there is.

These are times for getting our feet wet, friends, and keeping our focus on Jesus. The winds and waves are whipping up. We can stay in the boat, and love God. But Jesus has much, much more in store for us as we get out of the boat. God has much, much need of us, as we get out of the boat. The Spirit has gifts in abundance to equip us, as we get out of the boat.

Many organizations provide food, shelter, education and healthcare. What we have as followers of Christ is the faith in a power greater than ourselves, greater than the solar system, more powerful than disease and despair, stronger than death – the power that made the universe and raised Christ from the dead. We are a living counter-narrative to the world's story of limitation and "don't get your hopes up." We are God's hello in the face of goodbyes. We are those are all called to live with our hopes up, our feet ready to jump in.

Where do you think God might be inviting you to get out of the boat?
Where do you see Jesus on the water, beckoning us to join him?
What risks are we being called to as churches in this time of hardship?
To share our wealth, share our love, share our faith?

Peter didn't walk very far. But he went far enough. And he didn't walk alone. Jesus was there when his faith went out from under him. But if he hadn't gotten out of the boat, he wouldn't have known that he could walk on water – or that Jesus would be sure to save him no matter what. Peter got out of the boat, got his feet wet, focused on Jesus, walked toward him. And he cried for help when he needed it.

There are our marching orders. To live by faith, not by fear. Get out of the boat, walk, and ask for help. Yes, there may be crocodiles and hippopotamuses and storms in that water. But once we're out of the boat, we keep your eyes on Jesus. And he is calling: Come! Out of the boat. The water's fine! *Amen.*

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."