



## **Resurrection Signs**

### **Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33**

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The disciples attempt to cross the lake. This is not their desire: “Jesus made them...” Do they go willingly? Do they protest? Do they show reservation? Have they tried reasoning with Jesus about the hour of the day (it was late: v. 15) and alternative choices? The Evangelist does not explore or report beyond the command of Jesus.

The fact that Jesus “*made*” (“insisted,” “compelled,” “forced”) the disciples to go indicates a one-sided decision: no arguments or counter-proposals accepted. Jesus is being firm in protecting his boundaries. He needs time alone and the disciples need to go.

Ultimately, the disciples do not deviate from what Jesus commands. They show obedience and leave for the other shore. They trust his judgment. And yet, things aren’t easy: the headwind picks up and the waters get rough. The strong winds and high waters represent the hostile forces of the world.

Jesus must have noticed the change in the weather and yet, goes up the mountain by himself to pray: he had shown this “careless” behavior before (Mt 8:23-27). Is Jesus being selfish? Is this a sign of trust in the ability of the disciples to handle the challenging roughness of the waters? Does he trust God to take care of them? Or is he merely super exhausted physically and emotionally spent demonstrating his humanity?

Solitary prayer is a recurring feature of his life: the spirit needs to be nurtured; self-care is necessary for healthy living and service to others. He didn’t have a chance to mourn his traumatic loss: John’s beheading (Mt 14:13-14). Jesus is quick at work, ministering to the people he came to love and serve (Mt 14:15-21). If he doesn’t take care of his emotional state, how can he have emotional space and physical endurance for others? thus, he seeks renewal in solitude and prayer. His prayer retreat lasts the whole night: solitude, prayer, and rest are necessary.

Meanwhile, the boat is battered by waves and there are headwinds. The journey lasts all night: a long, fearful, tiring, stressful, and unnerving time. Jesus did not show the whole night. A few hours crossing was taking them hours. After so much rowing they barely got anywhere. Did they question Jesus’ care for them? Did they question the faithfulness and presence of God? didn’t God promise plans to prosper and not to harm, plans to give hope for the future (Jer 29:11)? Has God forgotten them (Is 49:15-16)? Did they play the blame game not unlike the experience of Jonah (the “If we are in trouble whose fault is it?” grumbling: see Jonah 1)? Was there desperation? Cursing? Resignation?

Jesus shows up at first lights. That’s a long time since the disciples started the crossing. Why not sooner? Is this Matthew’s equivalent of John’s resuscitation of Lazarus’ story (see John

11:5-6)? What is he trying to achieve? A sense of helplessness in the disciples about human resources? Their own conclusion that the Lord God will give them strength in times of need (Is 40:28-31; Ps 27)? Were they challenged in believing the experience of the psalmist who declares the consistent presence of the Lord: “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Ps 139:8)? What about God’s assuring might: “Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic” (Ps 29:1-4)?

Sometime before dawn, Jesus descends from the hills, and approaches the boat. When the disciples see him walking on the water towards them, they’re terrified. “It’s a ghost!” they cry. “Immediately,” Matthew’s Gospel tells us, Jesus identifies himself in an effort to reassure his disciples: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

The disciples are terrified at seeing him “*walking on the sea.*” Again, no word of terror during the storm and no complaint of Jesus’ absence are reported. As long as “reality” aligns with what they know, all is well, so to speak: they have managed a boat in high waters before. Now they find a situation they can’t handle: no skills, expertise, or luck will get them out of trouble. They have exhausted themselves trying. Is this one of the times when the disciples face fear of the unknown, of suffering, of death, of oblivion?

Only after Jesus had arrived did they find any reprieve from their storm (Matthew 14:32). The terror comes with seeing something extra-ordinary and contrary to the law of physics: what scares them is seeing Jesus *walking* on the waters. That’s something only God can muster.

Biblically, water assumes positive and negative symbology. It represents evil, sinfulness (Noah’s universal flood; the parting of the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan) as well as the gift of the Spirit (“living water”). In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Lord overcomes the waves of death (Ps 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Is 43:16; Sir 24:5-6).

Walking on the waters is a sign of divine power. The terror is both awe and fear of being in the presence of God for how can one see God and live (Ex 33:20)? Terror is a recognition of the divine.

Jesus declares: “It is I.” reminiscent of the divine Self-identification (Ex 3:14; Deut 32:39; Is 41:4; 43:10; Ps 144:7). Jesus shares in the divine power to save.

As far as we know, eleven of the disciples, frozen in fear, say nothing. But Peter — brash, impetuous, over-the-top Peter — proposes a bizarre test to prove the would-be ghost’s identity: “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says, “Come,” and Peter steps boldly (recklessly?) out of the boat. A few yards in, and he starts sinking in his own stupidity. Is this a test of Jesus or rather of Peter? “Lord, save me!” he cries. “Immediately,” Jesus reaches out his hand, catches Peter, and delivers him to safety.

“You of little faith,” Jesus says to the breathless, sopping Peter, once the worst of the danger is over. “Why did you doubt?” We never hear Peter’s answer, if he manages to offer one. But as soon as he and Jesus climb into the boat, the wind dies down, the sea grows still and calm, and the disciples recognize Jesus for who and what he is. “Truly,” they say in awe, “you are the Son of God.”

Many have drawn the conclusion that Peter's (and our) little faith is the result of distraction: he notices the wind and doesn't keep his eyes on Jesus. That seems to be the reason for drowning. But God never asks us to prove our faith. Jesus would never ask us to put ourselves in danger, in defiance of natural law, disrespecting nature and then asking for God to do something about it. Nowhere in the Gospels are we called to prove our faith (or test God's character: Deuteronomy 6:16) by taking pointless risks that threaten our lives.

Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach us that bad things happen to us because we're too chicken to earn God's protective care. Whether we're talking about respecting the power of the sea during a vicious storm, or heeding the professional expertise of scientists and doctors, the same caution applies. Recklessness is not faith. Stupidity is not courage.

When the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, they're terrified. They don't recognize him; they think they're seeing a ghost or a demon. Naturally, they cry out in fear. At that instant, Jesus offers them comfort and reassurance. He tells them exactly who he is. "Take courage! It is I! Don't be afraid."

We don't know if the silent eleven take Jesus at his word. But we know for sure that Peter does not. He sets Jesus an identity test: "Lord, if it's you..."

Listen carefully. Can you hear the echoes of another famous identity test in Peter's words? The identity test Jesus faces in the wilderness, forty days after his baptism? "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 4)

What's at play here is not the morality or immorality of human fear. What's at play is how we respond to God's presence when we're afraid. What's at play is what we say and think and feel and do when the divine comes to us in guises we don't recognize.

If we extend the meaning of "drowning" to include all the ways in which we human beings find ourselves in over our heads in this world, then of course we experience fear. Of course we feel afraid as we face serious illnesses, and failing economies, and social isolation, and political brokenness. Of course we feel afraid when unhealthy marriages, sick children, unfriendly neighbors, and financial uncertainty threaten our lives. Of course we feel afraid when our basic biology betrays us into anxiety, panic, and depression.

The issue is not fear; the issue is where fear leads. Notice the first place that Peter's fear leads him. He has every right to be afraid when his boat pitches in the dark sea; feeling scared in the face of danger is not the problem. The problem is that his fear leads him straight to suspicion and distrust. His fear leads him to test and question Jesus's identity, instead of taking Jesus's self-disclosure at face value. "If it's you, enable me to do the impossible. If it's you, make magic happen so that I will be dazzled out of all doubt. If it's you, reorder reality and prove to me that you're God." When we are in fear mode, it is easy to abuse faith as something transactional: "Okay, Jesus, prove that you care about me. I'll do A, but you had better do B in return."

Even though Peter steps out of the boat, his circumstances remain wild and turbulent and dangerous. If Peter thinks he can manipulate Jesus into Making Faith Easy, he learns otherwise fast.

Sometimes Jesus demonstrates his power in miraculous, Technicolor ways. At other times, though, we need to trust that his Incarnation — his quiet, abiding presence in our scary and

dangerous world — is sufficient for the circumstances we face. Most often, Jesus chooses to demonstrate power in vulnerability, weakness, solidarity. The wildness of the sea is no proof of God's absence.

Once in the safety of the boat, Jesus asks: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I wonder if Jesus asks this question, not because Peter gives way to panic and nearly drowns, but because his doubt compels him to make a foolish request in the first place. I wonder if Jesus's question means something like this: "Peter, as soon as you saw me, I told you exactly who I was. You heard my voice. I spoke words of assurance and comfort to you. Why didn't you believe me?"

Maybe, when Jesus asks us why we doubt, what he's really asking is: why do you doubt *me*? Why do you doubt that I am with you, for you, in you, and around you? After all this time, why do you still resort to test me?

In my mind, the power of this Gospel story doesn't lie in Peter's faith, doubt, courage, or fear. Peter's trajectory is not the point of the reading. Jesus's trajectory is the point: it never changes. It is constant, focused, and relentless. From the very beginning of the story, Jesus moves towards his disciples. He moves towards them when they're struggling at sea; when they decide he's a menacing ghost; when they're terrified by his approach; when they're reckless enough to set him a dare; when they begin to drown; when they ask for help; when they're shivering and sorry for their rashness; when they realize who he is and what he is. He moves towards them when they worship him.

Jesus never stops moving towards the ones he loves. He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are. We are the ones he's bound for. Our flailing bodies are the ones he pulls out of the water. Ours is the boat he climbs into. It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves, again and again and again: "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid."

He is Lord, now and forever. Amen.