

**If you want to walk on water...**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

**Rev. Alida Ward 8-16-15**

So, what's the craziest thing you've ever done?

I don't mean the most dubious decision you've ever made,  
like spending too much money on that car with the terrible mileage,  
or saying yes to a jalapeno popper challenge after a substantial Mexican dinner.  
Those are more in the category of poor decisions,  
and I say those as one familiar with both of them.

I mean, what's the most hair-raising, heart-palpitating, palms-sweating thing you've done?

This topic came up at our most recent staff meeting,  
when Rachel, our ministry intern, told us about her weekend.

She had just gotten back from the Hot Air Balloon festival in Binghamton New York,  
where dozens of hot air balloons -- maybe hundreds? I'm not sure -- had all soared up in the air  
simultaneously, with Rachel in one of them.

As she described the joys of ascending into the air,

I actually felt my knees grow weak.

"And then a gust of wind catches you and you just go whoosh, hundreds of feet up," she said  
cheerfully, and at that, David actually looked like he might pass out just thinking about it.

*That* terrifies me -- but actually the same week Rachel had done that,

I'd gone ziplining up in Vermont,

sliding down wires strung all the way down Okemo mountain.

Which, as others in the staff meeting pointed out,

was also in theory pretty terrifying.

And I won't lie -- the first leap off the first platform was indeed nausea-inducing.

How about you? I'm guessing there are some para-sailors here,

you know, where you're attached to the back of a boat by a rope,

while you float high up in the air on a parachutey thing -- now, that's crazy --

did you see the video this week of the couple whose rope *broke* while they were soaring along up  
there?

So instead of being tethered to a boat,

all of a sudden they were just adrift in the air, free-falling.

They were fine, they landed in some bushes on the beach,

but I guarantee every one of the hundreds of screaming people on that beach watching it happen will  
now never try THAT.

And I do know that we have more than a few in this church who have gone parachute-jumping, holy cow.

*Maybe* some day I'll try that. Maaaybe.

I can see where the floating through the air part might be nice -- it's just jumping out a plane part that strikes me as *not* so very nice. I'm actually now getting sweaty palms just contemplating it.

Now, I have to believe that there were some seriously sweaty palms in the story that Andrew just read to you.

What Andrew just read is probably the most famous story about Jesus there is, besides of course Christmas and Easter stuff.

This is the walking on water story.

Yeah, that story.

It's pretty much the go-to story when you're talking Jesus; and it's the one that gets thrown up to me all the time as a challenge, as in "you don't really believe all that walking-on-water stuff, do you?"

So a couple quick things before we get back to the story:

First -- do I think you have to believe Jesus walked on water to be a good Christian?

In a word, no. I don't think this walk across a lake is the heart of the Gospel, and if it's where you're getting stuck, then just set it aside.

The heart of the Gospel is love: that was Christ's message, that was the takeaway he wanted you to get, always.

In fact, there's a good bit of love in this story -- but more about that later.

And second -- do I think Jesus actually walked on water?

Well, here's the thing.

A whole lot of people Jesus was with that day sure thought he did.

Enough so that they told the story everywhere they went, and eventually people started writing down the story, and eventually it ended up in a book that's sitting in front of you in your pews right now.

And frankly, the older I get, the easier it seems to believe:

life is full of wonder, and who I am to question whether something wondrous happened that night.

But here's the thing. If you get hung up on Jesus' walking on water,

if you put all your focus on that part of the story,

you're going to miss the more important part of the story.

And that's where PETER walks on water.

Which brings me back to the sweaty palms that I *know* have to be involved here.

Imagine the scene.

Jesus' twelve disciples, and probably some other folks too, are out on the sea of Galilee, which is one heck of a big lake.

They had set out in the boat to cross over to the other side, to Gennesaret, a place Jesus wanted to go and share his message of love.

Only Jesus hasn't come with them --

after a long and tiring day which included feeding five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes, Jesus was looking for some alone time.

Seriously, that's what the scripture says -- he wanted some time to go pray on his own.

So he sends the disciples on ahead, in the boat, and he tells them he'll catch up with them later.

Of course, what they're expecting is that he'll hop on another boat.

Instead, as darkness falls and the wind picks up,

the disciples see a figure moving across the waters to them,

and they, it says, are terrified. Which is not an unreasonable reaction.

But Jesus calls out to them, he says, "it's me. Don't be afraid."

And here's where it gets remarkable, if it wasn't remarkable enough already.

You've got people lining the railing of the boat, it's probably tipping to the side at this point, they're looking at what their minds cannot even comprehend:

the waters holding Jesus up.

And one of those people says,

You know what, I'm just going to jump off this boat and go join Jesus out there.

It's Peter.

Peter who has always been kind of the exuberantly faithful one.

But you can't tell me his palms weren't sweating.

You can't tell me that at that moment he stood on the side of the boat,

getting ready to jump into the stormy waters,

you can't tell me his knees weren't shaking, and his stomach churning.

And if not his, then surely everyone around him who suddenly realized that he wasn't kidding, he was doing it.

Peter was jumping overboard, for crying out loud,

a leap of faith to end all leaps of faith.

Think parachute jumping, hot air ballooning, ziplining and parasailing.

All of that. Peter, with no safety equipment,

flings himself off the boat

trusting that the waters will also hold him up.

Trusting that what he is seeing the Savior of the World do --

walk on water --

he can do too.

Unbelievable trust. Unbelievable faith. Unbelievably crazy.

But it works. It works.

Peter walks on water. Walks, jogs, skips, whatever, he gets himself right out to Jesus.

And in one and the same moment, he goes "Yeah" and then "Oh, shoot" -- 'cause right then, it says, he looks down.

Never a good idea. He looks down, freaks out, starts to sink.

And immediately, it says, immediately Jesus grabs his hand and pulls him back up. And they walk to the boat together.

And here's what I picture all those other eleven disciples saying to themselves.

They're saying "Why didn't I jump out of the boat?"

That looked pretty cool, what Peter just did. Why didn't I give it a try?

Why'd I stay in the boat?"

This week, from one of the websites that pops up in the newsfeeds of ministers, this quote popped up.

"If you want to walk on water," it said, "get out of the boat."

If you want to walk on water, get out of the boat.

Be Peter, in other words. Not the guys still standing on the boat, wishing they'd done it. Be Peter.

If you want to walk on water, get out of the boat.

Which means what for us?

I think it means a couple things.

It means, first of all, be willing to give faith a try.

There is that moment known to everyone who does something a little crazy, that moment when you say "this is nuts."

I got that this summer when the zipline instructor said

"Hey, on the next platform, try stepping off with your eyes closed."

Peter had to know, as he jumped off the boat, that this was indeed crazy.

But he did it.

And there is that about throwing yourself into faith which requires a willingness to trust beyond reason.

To open your heart to the possibility that there truly is a God of Love who cherishes you beyond words,

that what we see with our eyes is not all there is,

that we live in a world infused with God's grace.

I can't prove that to you, that Bible in front of you can't prove that to you,  
you can only discover it for yourself ...  
and the only way to do that is by getting out of the boat.  
Stepping out from what is as solid and real as the deck beneath Peter's feet,  
and jumping into the unknown trusting in a love that is just as real.

A lot of folks, a whole lot of folks,  
hesitate on the edge of the boat, reluctant to jump into the waters of faith ...  
because the boat is solid and real and it makes sense,  
and jumping, leaping, that doesn't make so much sense.  
But if you keep waiting for when it does make sense, that moment will never come.  
If you want to experience what Peter did:  
being caught and held by love,  
being kept afloat by grace, then you just gotta leap.

If you want to walk on water, get out of the boat.  
Believe.

And here's what else it means, I think, here's what else:  
If you want to live an extraordinary life,  
if you want to live a life that is demonstrably grace-filled, hope-filled,  
then let your life be held aloft by God's power,  
let the waters of God's mercy be what keeps you up.  
By which I mean live in such a way each day that the world can see you are walking in the company  
of Christ,  
like Peter on the waters.  
The most extraordinary example of that, to me, this summer,  
the most extraordinary demonstration of someone who was held up by God's grace  
was Nadine Collier.  
Nadine Collier, whose mother, Ethel, died at the hands of Dylann Roof while she sat at Bible Study in  
Emmanuel AME church.  
You remember Nadine.  
It was she who asked to speak directly to Dylann Roof at his bond hearing, just 24 hours after the  
shooting.  
And she said this, she said "I just want everybody to know, I forgive you.  
You took something very precious away from me.  
I will never talk to her again, I will never be able to hold her again.  
You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people.  
But God forgives you, and I forgive you."

Nadine Collier, right then, before all our eyes,  
she walked on water.

Unwavering, unsinking, no fear of the waves and the wind,  
she let us all see that what held her up was nothing but faith,  
nothing but the grace of God and the love that death cannot touch.  
She showed us how to do it, this water-walking.  
She showed us how.

If you want to walk on water, get out of the boat.

Take the leap -- trust that there is a waiting God whose love will hold you up.  
Trust that there is more, so much more, than the boat you've been sitting on,  
that there is a grace waiting to receive you.

If you want to walk on water, get out of the boat.

Live in such a way that everyone can see what it is that your life rests on:  
miracle and hope, mercy and possibility, love beyond all loves.

And when you falter -- because we all do, we all do --  
when you falter you will find, like Peter did,  
that there is a hand to hold you right away,  
arms to lift you from the waves,  
and a companion to walk beside you till the winds die down again.

If you want to walk on water, get on out of the boat.

Amen.