

Staying Focused

Matt 14:22-33

So there I was, standing on a tiny platform
four stories above the ground.

A tiny platform attached to a tree,
to which, fortunately, I was also attached.

I was standing on the edge of the platform
contemplating another platform, attached to another tree,
10 yards away from me.

The idea was for me to leave the safety of my current platform,
and get to that other tree.

And the way that I was going to be doing that was by way of a wire
strung between the two trees –
a wire that I would be walking across.

Supposedly.

This was May of this year,
and it was one of our Junior Pilgrim Fellowship's regular outings to the
Adventure Park in Bridgeport.

The Adventure Park is tucked behind the Discovery Museum –
it's 5 acres of forest

and up in the trees there are almost 200 wooden platforms waaaay high off
the ground

and you travel around from platform to platform

by walking across swaying bridges

or swinging on ropes, Tarzan-like,

or, as in this case, just doing a straight-up classic wire walk.

I stood on the edge of the platform and I thought a number of thoughts.

Thoughts like “what are you trying to prove, Alida?”

and “aren't you getting a little old for this, Alida?”

and “why don’t they tell you about these things in seminary?”

But there were kids behind me waiting for me to get a move on,
and kids ahead waiting for me to catch up,
so it was time to go.

And how do you get from one tree to another, four stories up?

The classic rule: you don’t look down.

You look straight ahead.

You put all your focus on that next platform, and that is *all* you look at.

You keep your eyes on that solid ground not so far away,
that safe place just waiting for you.

And you don’t look down.

Because if you do – and I can attest to this –
the knees wobble and the palms sweat and the stomach churns
and the little voice in the back of your heads says
“are you NUTS? what are you doing out here?”

Which is exactly the thought that started going through the disciple Peter’s
head
that night he decided to give walking on water a try.

Everyone thinks that the point of the story Gilly just read is that Jesus
walked on water.

I mean, this is kind of the quintessential Jesus story, right? – the classic.
It’s the miracle story that everyone seems to know –
if you know nothing else about Jesus, you know that he walked on water.
It’s the story spun into a whole bunch of stupid religious jokes,
and of course it’s the typical line when you’re talking about someone who
thinks they’re God’s gift --
that Bob, he thinks he walks on water.

But actually the real heart of the story is Peter.
 Peter, he's just a guy like any of us,
 and you know, turns out he walks on water too.
 At least for a little while.

The story goes like this -- it was a dark and stormy night,
 and the disciples were out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee by themselves,
 because Jesus had told them to go on ahead, he'd catch up.
 And he stayed back to pray for a while.
 And then – maybe because he was worried about his friends,
 maybe because he just wanted to get back to them quickly,
 the story says that Jesus took off across the lake to catch up to their boat.
 And when the disciples saw him coming, well, it's not surprising –
 they were scared out of their mind. So would we all be.

But Peter, it says, Peter who was always enthusiastic,
 always trying, stands up in the boat,
 and says, *Lord, call me to you, and I'll do this too.*
 And Jesus says, *come on out. You can do it, Peter, come on out.*
 And Peter jumps out of the boat.
 You talk about a leap of faith, this is it.
 And it works! Peter's doing it, he's walking on water,
 with that heart full of faith and complete trust,
 he's walking on water.
 And the way he's doing it is by staying totally focused on Jesus –
 he's got his eyes locked on Jesus
 like the safe platform on the next tree that he's just got to get to.
 And as long as he does that,
 as long he stays focused on Jesus, Peter's doing all right.
 He's doing all right.

Until – until, the story says, Peter looks around. He looks down.

And, it says, “he became frightened.”

Well, yeah. That’s understandable.

He realizes he’s in the middle of a lake standing on water, for Pete’s sake.

Peter looks down at the deep scary waters below him,

and he thinks “what the heck am I doing?”

And that’s it. He starts to sink like a stone.

Right about then is when you realize that this story isn’t just about Peter.

This story is about us, about each one of us.

As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus,

this man was walking on water.

As long as he kept his focus, he was okay.

It was only when he looked down that he was in trouble,

it was only when he looked away from Jesus

and looked at the waters and the waves and wind,

that’s when it was all too much.

That’s how you know this story is really about us.

Because every one of us at some point looks down and gets scared.

Every one of us,

no matter how much we believe or want to believe,

no matter how much we try, we pray,

every one of us looks down sometime.

Every one of us at some point loses focus,

forgets how to believe,

forgets we are loved.

Every one of us at some point looks down, gets scared, and sinks.

And then comes the most important line in the whole story:

Immediately, it says, *immediately* Jesus reached out his hand

and caught Peter.

Immediately Jesus reached out and caught him.

I read a beautiful essay the other day
by a woman named Maggie Doyne.

Maggie Doyne has given the last 13 years of her life to
educating children and empowering women in Nepal.
Back in 2015 she was named one of CNN's Heroes of the year,
the Dalai Lama called her an unsung her of compassion.

And she wrote this:

I've spent the last seventeen years completely surrounded by children.

*I'm part of a team that runs a residential care home in midwestern Nepal.
There is rarely a day that goes by that I don't interact with a few hundred
kids.*

Like most humans, I struggle at times with mental health.

*To stay hopeful, to stay sane, to hold onto joy despite the sadness,
suffering, and violence in this world is a constant battle.*

*But over the years, during some of the darkest days and most difficult
moments, I started to notice something:*

*When I look into the eyes of a child, it's almost impossible for me to feel
anything other than hope.*

While my brain churns in fear,

*I look down and see a three-year-old holding a perfectly smooth stone
in their hand, in awe and wonder.*

They ask me to keep it safe in my pocket.

*And when my mind wanders and worries,
a six-year-old stops me, points to the sky, and says,*

"Maggie mom! Did you SEE THE MOON?!"

Children are [the presence of the] sacred to me.

They are our world's most unending promise.

For Maggie Doyne, when the winds are too much,
when the waters below are too scary,

it is the hand of a child reaching out to her that pulls her back up.
 It is the eyes of a child looking into hers that gives her hope again.
 And those eyes, I tell you with certainty, those eyes are Christ's own eyes.
 That hand in hers is Christ's own hand.
 Those children are sacred to her because they are Christ himself pulling her
 back up out of the waves,
 focusing her eyes again on hope.

We may not face the daily challenges of faith and hope that Maggie Doyne
 does.

But each one of us gets scared.
 Every one of us,
 no matter how focused we try to stay on hope and possibility,
 no matter how many inspirational stories we hear,
 no matter how strong our prayer life,
 every one of us at some point looks down.

Every one of us finds ourselves
 in a time when our own strength is suddenly inadequate to the task.
 Every one of us looks down, gets scared, and slips.

Immediately, the story says,
 immediately Jesus reaches out a hand to us.
 Immediately, when we are overwhelmed, uncertain, doubting, struggling,
 hesitating, grieving, panicking,
 immediately Jesus reaches out a hand to catch us.
 Doesn't wait to see how we manage on our own.
 Doesn't let us flounder around a little to teach us a lesson.
 Immediately, Jesus reaches out a hand.
 Immediately there is a hand for us to hold.

And that's why we're here, Sunday after Sunday.

To grab hold of that hand and get our focus back.
We wouldn't be here if we thought we could do it alone,
if we could scramble fearlessly through life without ever looking down.
We wouldn't be here if we had sailed through every bit of turbulence with no
anxiety,
if we had weathered all griefs without feeling crazy,
if we had tackled each challenge with no hint of self-doubt.

But no one can do that.
No one who is human can walk on water all by themselves.

So that's why we're here.
That's why we're here.
To remember whose hand is reaching out to catch us, whenever we look
down and tremble.
To remember who it is who can pull us out of the waves and calm the seas,
who can walk with us through what is dark and mysterious,
who can love us when we are unlovable,
and comfort us when we're uncertain.
To remember that we are not meant to do this alone,
that we do not need to do this alone.
We're here to get our focus back,
our focus on the one who's holding out his hand to us.

In three weeks' time, we're going to be joined here in worship
by the men of Pivot Ministries in Bridgeport.
Their Gospel Choir will be singing for us,
and the men themselves will be sharing stories with us.
And the stories they'll be sharing, I can tell you now,
will be stories of what it means to be pulled up from the waves,
what it means to get your focus back.
Because the men who come to Pivot for help

are those who have realized that the waters are too deep for them,
the winds too strong.

They come from lives filled with struggles, of every kind –
incarceration, alcohol, addiction.

And at Pivot, they learn – learn *again* –
about the God who is ready to love them.

They learn about the Christ who stands before them,
saying “walk to me. Keep your eyes on *me*
and you can walk on water.”

When they come here, you’ll hear stories from people like Joseph,
whom I met the last time I preached at Pivot.

Years ago, he was huddled on a park bench in the rain
when one of the Pivot staff found him,
and told him there was a way up, and a way out,
a way out of the depths he was sinking in.

He let himself be rescued from those waters,
he grabbed hold of Christ’s hand.

Now he walks on the waters of faith,
with his eyes focused on the one who loves him.

Our stories may be different,
but, friends, we too need that hand.

And that’s why we’re here.

We come here to grab hold of Christ’s hand,
to get our eyes focused back on the one who loves us.

We come here to be lifted out of whatever depths we find ourselves in.
To walk on the waters of faith,
hand in hand with the one who loves us.

Amen.

