

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 6, 2019  
Sermon Title: "Wifeless Scones: the Art of Walking  
On Water"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

## **Matthew 14:22-33**

*Immediately he 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 towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, 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 towards 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 worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*

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Alida has been in India with 14 from our Church. And thanks to technology, we've been in touch at the beginning and end of each day, and each day has been filled with excitement and inspiration—very emotional, very powerful, and very much fun. This is an annual trip for Alida, and one of the annual traditions is a big New Year's Day Church service in the village of Jamalapuram.

It was a day filled with a long journey, baptisms, a long Church service, Indian food, and a long ride back to their hotel rooms. But when I spoke with Alida, she was sky high. It had been a great day. She was very excited.

She loves preaching there and told me all about her sermon based on today's Scripture lesson about "Jesus walking on water." She was so excited telling me about it that I said she should preach it here. Alida said, "No. It was for that time, that place, those people." A true preacher's answer.

So I said, "O.K., I'll preach it! You have to admit, it's quite a story. It had been a long day for Jesus too. Jesus's friend, John the Baptist, had just been murdered. Crowds of people followed Jesus everywhere. They had just fed 5,000 people with only a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread. Everyone is emotionally spent, drained, exhausted.

At that point, Jesus sends his Disciples off in a boat to cross the lake. He'll join them later. For Jesus, it's time to recharge his batteries, and the way he does it is prayer. The Bible says, "Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray." Nowadays, we might call that "getting centered," "taking stock of yourself," "getting outside your own head." For Jesus it was prayer: Jesus and God, one on one, talk it out, whatever. Thoughts, questions, worries, doubts, plans, fears, anger, needs, hopes. Put it out there. Air them out. Say them out loud. Or in your head. Give voice to it all. That's prayer. That's what Jesus felt a need to do. That's why Jesus went to the mountainside.

Back when people still had payphones (remember payphones?), there was a popular sarcastic sign that said, "Here's 25 cents. Call someone who cares." In other words, don't bother me. Prayer is the opposite. "Call me," God says. "Any time. About anything."

New Year's Day I opened the Church up at 5 AM, turned the lights on, put our prayer candle stand in front with fresh candles. That night I came back to close up. To my amazement, 29 candles were burning. They are four-hour candles, and they were at various stages; plus another 10 were totally burned to the bottom. Thirty-nine times someone had come here to the top of this hill, this little mountainside, to pray.

Why do people do it? Why did Jesus do it? Why do I do it? Because it works. Somehow, some way, to some degree, something happens. It works. The Rolling Stones are right. "You can't always get what you want. But if you try, sometimes, well, you just might find you get what you need."

We don't know what Jesus was after, but we know what Jesus did after. He sees his Disciples in the boat, on the water a long way off, in rough seas and afraid. So, Jesus sets out to meet them . . . walking on the water. Just like that: walking, across the lake, on the water.

This really freaks them out until Jesus tries to reassure them. "Take courage," he says, "don't be afraid. It is I." Peter is not so sure. Big, bold, brash, loud-mouthed Peter, he's not so sure. "IF it's you," he says, "if . . . tell me to come to you on the water." As if to say, "Teach me the same trick." Or, as the bad old joke goes, "Tell me where the rocks are so I can walk on water too." Cynic.

Jesus calls his bluff, invites Peter to take that "leap of faith." Peter climbs over the side of the boat, starts walking on water, until he looks around, reality sets in, common sense, fear . . . and Peter starts to sink. "Lord, save me," poor, embarrassed Peter shouts. Jesus grabs his hand, they climb in the boat, and everyone declares, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Which doesn't mean much. The soldier in charge of killing Jesus said the same thing. But that's another story for another day.

I'm not a big fan of catchy sermon titles. Mine usually are boringly straightforward. Half the time I don't even have one until Diana Beeton, my fearless transcriber of every sermon, suggests one.

But this one today I couldn't resist: "Wifeless Scones." No doubt inspired by two things. I've become an addict, a fanatic of "The Great British Baking Show." And I am "wifeless" until tomorrow. I happen to adore scones. Especially scones with dark fruits—blueberries, raspberries, blackberries—preferably together. And every week Alida makes me a week's worth of blueberry/raspberry/blackberry scones. Which ran out with Alida 7,000 miles away in India. Panic set in. Desperation.

Then, a marvelous idea! All those "British Baking Show" contestants—they make it look easy and fun; and even the disasters usually taste good. The judges will say, "Well, it's flat, it didn't rise, it's sloppy in the middle, it looks like a mess . . . But the taste is extraordinary!"

So, I made scones. There were berries left over from a couple of weeks ago. A scone mix. A bowl. An oven. And me. What could go wrong? Our son, Andres, had been using the oven, so it was already heated up and raring to go. The exact temperature didn't matter, right? The recipe called for a lot of butter. That seemed a little bit much; and it wanted only a little water, which didn't make any sense. And I love, love, love berries. Therefore: I cut the butter by half, doubled the water, tripled the berries, mixed it up proudly (not using any of Alida's fancy contraptions—like a mixer). Hey, I took three years of Home Ec at P.S. 90!

Dressed in my black sweater, I mixed the flour and berries until my sweater was white and my hands were blue; shaped some piled-high fat scones; tossed them in the oven for, oh, it says 12 minutes, but at 12 they didn't look right, so I upped the heat. Kept them in another five, 10, lost count, "till they were brown," the box said. When I pulled them out, they were . . . flat, really, really flat, and

soupy, red/blue liquid everywhere. I soaked up all the liquid with paper towels and put them in for another couple of minutes. At which point Andres says, "You know, there was fuzz all over those berries, like fungus or something. Maybe mold." To which I responded haughtily, "You know, that's where penicillin comes from, so it's good for us, plus it's being baked in."

"Wifeless Scones." The result of a know-it-all doing it my own way, ignoring instructions or preparations.

Scones are actually simple. Not easy, as it turns out, but simple. Life is relatively simple. Again, not easy, but with instructions, you can keep it simple. Jesus fed the 5,000 with a simple formula: Take what you have, don't whine, give thanks, share, conserve.

Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan to answer a simple question: Who is my neighbor? With a simple answer: the one in need, the one who can help. Jesus tells how to get good results in his Parable of the Sower: good effort, good choices, good aim. Jesus tells us how to get to heaven: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely. And in today's story, he gives a formula for doing what others think you can't do: pray, believe, dare.

Most of the time the focus of the story is on Jesus, and Peter for a while, walking on water. It's impressive. But my guess is that the key to that impressive feat was his choice to go to the mountainside and pray

Let's say your child is a budding baseball or softball player. You go to Yankee Stadium, you see Aaron Judge hit a 480-foot home run, and you tell your kid, "See, that's what you do to hit a home run." Well, no. What you're missing is the days, years of preparation, practice, practice, practice, adjustments, learning, watching videos, studying opposing pitchers.

That's a sports version of Jesus going to the mountainside to pray. You don't just walk on water. You prepare to walk on water. You don't just make it through life. You prepare to make it through life. You don't just hit a home run. You don't just overcome difficulties. You don't just succeed. You prepare.

If I may bring up an unpleasantness, two years ago a few American soldiers were killed in an ambush by terrorists in Niger, West Africa. Everyone wanted to know what went so wrong. Last month, our U.S. military passed down their punishments, and several officers were officially "reprimanded," a big deal in the military. At least two officers were punished for failing to adequately train, prepare their soldiers. We want our soldiers prepared, and tragically those young soldiers had not been properly prepared. Preparation matters. You don't just hit a

home run. You don't just walk on water. You don't just win a battle. You don't just have a great 2019.

When I told Alida I was preaching her sermon, she sent me her notes, her outline. Preaching in India is fun because you're working with the translator, sentence by sentence, and they always embellish what we say. So Alida or I preach, say 12 words, and the translator will use 50 words. Sometimes they go on for minutes, which leaves plenty of time to think through your next sentence. My point is, Alida's notes are brief but probably took an hour to preach!

Alida's sermon focuses on Peter, who, you'll remember, tried to walk on water, succeeded, then failed, then got saved. Let me read her notes:

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*Matthew 14:21-32*

*Four things happen in this story, and these four things contain all the truths of the life of faith*

- 1- Peter leaps off the boat in faith*
- 2- Peter walks on water, with his eyes fixed on Jesus*
- 3- Peter sinks - when he loses sight of Jesus and is overwhelmed by fear*
- 4- Jesus reaches out his hand - immediately, it says - and raises Peter up*

*In Peter's story we see the life of faith –*

*When we are first believers, that's when we take that leap off the boat - with enthusiasm we throw ourselves into faith -*

*And for a while we are walking on water... our faith is strong - we believe all things and hope all things! Our prayer life is strong, our faith is sure.*

*But then the winds of life blow hard — there is grief, loss, doubt — we see the waves around us and we think "this is crazy - I can't walk on water" - we're overwhelmed, our faith weakens and we sink*

*But each time we sink - immediately Jesus reaches out his hand*

*On this New Year's Day, I ask you to think about where you are in this story.*

*Are you still waiting to jump off the boat? Then today is the day to take the leap of faith*

*Is your faith strong? Are you walking on water? Then this is the day to celebrate and thank God*

*Are you sinking? Are there griefs and worries that overwhelm?*

*Then today is the day to take the hand that is offered to you*

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What I've done today is back up that story: Before Peter took the hand of Jesus, before Peter lost sight of Jesus and sank, before Peter focused on Jesus and

walked on water, before Peter leapt off the boat in faith. Before all that, Peter and Jesus made serious preparation. *Serious preparation.*

How do you think Peter was in that boat in the first place? He chose, *chose* to leave his old life behind and accept Jesus's invitation to follow him. He entered the program. He was doing the training. He accepted the challenges, the risks, and learned from his mistakes. And Jesus? Well, he was fresh from the mountainside, one on one with God, alone time, time to let it all out, let it all in.

As we all begin this new year, I offer the fullness of our Church life to you—worship, classes, fellowship, projects, activities—the whole kit and caboodle, this is your preparation for when you'll need to hit a home run . . . or walk on water . . . or win a battle.

Let's stand and sing a lovely hymn, "Lead Me, Lord." No. 593. We'll sing it twice:

*Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness,  
make thy way plain before my face.  
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord, only,  
that makest me dwell in safety.*

*Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness,  
make thy way plain before my face.  
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord, only,  
that makest me dwell in safety.*

*I*