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Pentecost 11

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Pulled Up from Death to Life”
Text: Matthew 14:22-33; Romans 10:5-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Did Peter getting out of the boat show his *great* faith or his *little* faith?

I think we usually assume it shows his *great* faith. I mean, getting out of a boat to walk on water! I wouldn't do that! Not even in calm weather, let alone when there's a storm and winds and waves tossing the boat around. I'd be holding on to not get tossed out. You go, Peter!

But Peter's challenge to Jesus might show us something else going on here . . . So let's think about this a little more . . . and back up and go through the story a little, first . . .

It was ***the fourth watch of the night*** when this happened. That means between three and six am. Which means they've been sailing for awhile, while Jesus stayed behind. And they were ***a long way from land***. It was a stormy night, we are told, so I'm sure they hadn't had any sleep. It was all they could do to keep making progress. It was a night not fit for man nor beast, as they say. So to see the sun come up soon would be a most welcome sight!

And in the midst of this sleepless, all-night struggle, suddenly they see a figure out on the water. And knowing how things work in this world, that people don't *walk* on water but *sink* in water, they cry out, ***It is a ghost!*** Because what else could it be? Storms they can handle. Ghosts are another matter!

But then ***Jesus immediately***, Matthew says, ***spoke to them***. He doesn't leave them in their fear, not even a little. He assures them right away. ***Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*** And that should have been enough. It was the voice they knew, the voice of their Good Shepherd, the voice that had been speaking and teaching and healing, the voice that spoke only truth, the voice that had called them to discipleship - that voice spoke to them. *And that should have been enough.*

But this was different! Jesus wasn't there! He couldn't be there! He was far away. He

had stayed behind. So between that and sailing all night and the fact that people can't walk on water . . . they could put two and two together! It might be His voice . . . *maybe* . . . But to their small minds and little faiths, a ghost made more sense!

So Peter puts Jesus to the test. **Because he wants more than the Word of God** - he wants some kind of assurance, some kind of proof. So, ***Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*** Now, I don't know why a ghost couldn't lie and tell him that! But the point still holds: *Peter wants more.* And so he says, to paraphrase: *OK Lord, let's assume for the moment that what you said is true. Let's assume it's you. If it is, command me to come to you on the water. Then I'll believe it.*

And Jesus does. ***Come***, He says. I wonder if that's what Peter expected! If he hesitated . . . But Peter gets out of the boat and actually does it! We're not told how long, how many steps. One? Two? Twenty? It doesn't matter, really. Because soon enough, his fear sets in again. And he begins to sink. His idol, what he looked to for assurance, being able to walk on water, let him down. Because there's only one who could give him what he was looking for, what he needed, and what he needs now more than ever! And so he cries out, ***Lord, save me!*** And again ***immediately***, Jesus does. Jesus doesn't say, *C'mon! Try harder!* Or, *if you really believe it's me, take a couple more steps!* None of that nonsense. Jesus grabs him, takes him by the hand, and saves him.

And notice: while they're *still on the water*, before they get back to the boat, while Jesus is still holding onto Peter, he says, ***O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*** Now, you could take that in two ways. One is: *Why did you doubt that you would walk on water* . . . but that doesn't really fit because Peter had jumped out of the boat. So the second way maybe is better. This: *Why did you doubt my Word? Why did you doubt what I told you? Why did you doubt when I said, **It is I**? That would mean Peter getting out of the boat showed his *little* faith. That he wanted more than just the Word of Jesus. That wasn't enough.*

And here is where I think we can relate. Because like Peter, we sometimes(?) . . . often times(?) . . . **want more than just the Word of God.** Yes Lord, I know what you said. I know what your Word says. That you are with me always. That you are always working good for me. That my sins are forgiven. That I am your child. And lots more! But . . . you know, it sure doesn't seem like it! Life is tough; *stormy*! I have so many challenges. It feels like you're so far away. Your words are good, but . . . I need assurance, I need proof, I need a sign. Maybe not walking on water, or anything as big as that. But something! And we think, like Peter, if I get that, if I just get that, I'll be good. *Show me Jesus! Show me!*

But like with Peter, that's not the answer. It doesn't give us what we need. Oh,

maybe for a step or two or twenty, even. But the truth is, those things - signs, proof - are idols. False gods we are looking to for assurance, for what we think we need. *But they can't*. Because like with Peter, they don't last. Storms kick up again. New problems arise. Health problems, money problems, job situations. People and places change. New challenges to our faith. And then the old sign, the old proof, the old feeling, the old assurance, is either forgotten or isn't good enough anymore. I want, I need new, more, bigger, better. **Lord, if it is you**, if you are with really me, do this, do that. *Show me!*

It is the apostle Paul that points us back in the right direction again today. Not to signs and wonders. He says: ***So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*** The Word of Christ, which is enough. The Word of Christ preached to you. Which Peter himself would later affirm in one of his letters, when he would say that the things of this world come and go. You can't depend on them. *The grass withers, and the flower falls* - things wear out and people die. But there is something that won't; that will last. And so he says, *The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you* (1 Peter 1:24b-25). And then he would say in his next letter something remarkable, that even after seeing Jesus in His transfiguration (!), seeing Him in His glory, seeing this *sign*, *we have something more sure, the prophetic word* (2 Peter 1:19). Peter is clinging to the Word, pointing us to the Word of God. Seems he learned his lesson from that day on the sea . . .

That's something we need to learn, too. That the Word of the Lord is what we need. And that the Word of the Lord *is enough*.

And then the apostle Paul would write to the Corinthian Christians about this same thing! This yearning for a sign, for proof. Seems like it's part of our human nature. He said: *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom* - but that's not what we're about. *We preach Christ crucified* (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). That is, Christ crucified, dead, buried, and now risen from the dead, the victor over sin, death, and the grave. And risen from the dead, the one who is with us always, the one who is still working all things for our good (even if it doesn't seem like it or we can't imagine how!), and the one we can count on because He triumphed over everything that threatens us and frightens us. Our sin, the sins of others, shame, guilt, death, the grave - all taken care of by Him. All defeated by Him. To give life to us. So if you're looking for proof, you already have it. It is the resurrection that is our proof. The resurrection promised by the prophets, testified by the apostles, and now proclaimed to us and given to us.

So the Christian life isn't about being a water-walker, or about living a great, triumphant life that is the envy of everyone else. A life that looks successful and above the troubles of the world. That's what the devil wants you to think to make

you doubt like Peter and think you are inferior and you'll never measure up as he tries to drive you to despair and to give up. **No, the Christian life isn't about sinners walking on water - it is about sinners being pulled up by the hand of Jesus.** That's what Peter needed, what we need, what everyone needs. The hand of Jesus once nailed to the cross, but now pulling you up in the water of Baptism and making you His child. The hand of Jesus placed upon your head giving you the forgiveness of your sins. The hand of Jesus putting into your mouth His very own Body and Blood. And His Word spoken with each of these *signs* given to you. Signs which don't just point to, but actually *give* you His gifts. The forgiveness, life, salvation, assurance, and faith you need.

And so each week we come here like Peter. We're sinking, we're drowning in a stormy, evil, sin-filled world. We're troubled by our own doubts and fears wondering where our salvation is, and calling out with our hearts and minds and mouths, ***Lord, save me!*** For that's really what we're saying in confession each Sunday. I'm sinking! I'm in trouble! ***Lord, save me!*** And He does. He speaks: ***Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*** Do not be afraid, *I forgive you all your sins*. Do not be afraid, *take eat; take drink*, food for your soul. And those are not empty words, or simple reminders - **they do what they say**. His Word, and His Spirit working in and through that Word, giving us all we need and exactly what we need. You may not feel any different. Things may not seem any different. But it is just as true for you as it was for Peter that day on the sea, what we heard from St. Paul today: ***Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.***

It might not be easy. It probably won't be! With the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature attacking you. And you might still be in the first, second, or third watches of your night, surrounded by storms, being tossed about, laboring, struggling. But Jesus is not far off. He is where His Word is. Or to use the words we heard from St. Paul today, you don't have to ***ascend into heaven to bring Jesus down*** nor ***descend into the abyss to bring Him up***. He already did that for you! He came down from heaven in His incarnation. He came up from the dead in His resurrection. And He ascended not to leave you but to fill the earth with His presence, to be with you always, wherever you are. And so He is as near as His Word. For where His Word is, there is He. Peter needed to learn that. As do we. Both for ourselves, and to encourage others who are sinking. To encourage one another *until*, like with the disciples that day on the sea, the storms of life are past, and we are with Jesus, who was with us all along. And we confess with those disciples and the disciples of all time, ***Truly you are the Son of God. Who saved me.***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds

through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.