

Why Did You Doubt?

The story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water is one of the most beautiful images of the Gospel in the Bible! It does, however, have its detractors. First of all, there are those who reject the whole idea of miracles to begin with. They haven't experienced one so they conclude that they don't exist. They're like a native of a remote tribe in the Andes who has never seen a building taller than a hut and concludes that there are no buildings taller than huts. Such people—including many who consider themselves Christian—would be more comfortable if all the miracles were expunged from the Bible, leaving only its moral teachings and worldly wisdom. Thomas Jefferson was such a man. In his personal Bible he drew a line through all the parts of the New Testament that mentioned miracles or healings or referred to Jesus as the son of God. Of course he blotted out the entire crucifixion and resurrection. People like Thomas Jefferson don't look to the Bible for divine truth, but for confirmation of what seems sensible to them. They prefer human wisdom to the wisdom of God. But when our eyes are opened by faith and we are willing to be instructed by God's word--however odd or mysterious it may seem to us--it can teach us things that no amount of human wisdom can begin to grasp.

Even among Christians who do believe that God can and does perform miracles, and that the miracles recorded in the Bible really took place, there are those who find the water-walking miracle objectionable because it seems to them to involve a frivolous use of supernatural power.

In their eyes walking on water falls into the same category as sword-swallowing or fire-eating: a kind of cheap, carnival trick that should have been beneath Jesus' dignity.

But as we shall see, it is far more than that. Let's take this scripture verse by verse and see what we can make of it.

[14:22-23] "immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. "Jesus had just finished multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to feed over five thousand people.

While he dismissed the crowd, he instructed his disciples to set out by themselves and cross the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gederenes while he remained behind to pray. He knew that soon his disciples were going to desperately need his help but he still took time to pray. It was simply a question of putting first things first. And there is a lesson in that for us: always put prayer first. That's a lesson it took me a long time to learn. When something in my house would break I had a systematic way of trying to fix it: first I would tear into the job without thinking; second, I would mess it up; third, I would lose my temper and erupt in unpastoral words; fourth, I would call a plumber or electrician. After I had faithfully followed this procedure for about sixty years, I prayed about it and god suggested that I just skip the first three parts and call the plumber or electrician in to begin with. As you can see, I'm not a quick learner.

[14:23-24] "when evening came he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it."

In John's account of this incident we are told that the boat was the equivalent of about three and a half miles from shore when the storm hit.

Violent storms come up very quickly on the Sea of Galilee and this was apparently a bad one. The boat was being knocked about by the waves while being driven back by a headwind. The disciples had lost control of the boat and were at the mercy of the wind and the waves. In order to grasp how terrifying this would have been to them, you have to understand how mysterious and dangerous the sea appeared to the ancient Israelites. They imagined the sea to be satan's dominion and its churning waters and giant waves evidence of his rebellion against God. In the *Book of Job*, satan is described as a sea monster called Leviathan who, "...makes the depths churn like a boiling caldron and stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment..." Jonah describes the sea in words that are used elsewhere to describe "sheol" or hell: "the engulfing waters surrounded me, seaweed was wrapped around my head..." and "...I sank down and the earth beneath barred me in forever." The sea held not only physical terror but supernatural terror for the ancient Israelites. And so the disciples feared that they were not only in danger of drowning but of plunging into hell.

[13:25-26] "during the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said and cried out in fear." The initial effect of Jesus' appearance was to terrify them even more. Not being able to see clearly in the storm, they feared he was a supernatural spirit—perhaps sent up by satan to attack them. Then Jesus spoke eight words to them, and the significance of those eight words far exceeds what is conveyed by most translations. The *NIV* has it: "take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

But that is not exactly what Jesus said. What he did say is: “take courage. Don’t be afraid: **I am!**” Not just “it is I”--a simple act of self-identification, but “**I am!**” Or, in the Aramaic which Jesus undoubtedly used, “**Yahweh!**”—**the very name of God himself!** Jesus was not merely pointing out to them that it was him—their friend and leader; he was taking upon himself the name of **Yahweh**--the creator and ruler of the universe. Jesus used that word on one other occasion when he said to the Pharisees: “before Abraham was, **I am.**” The Pharisees understood very clearly what he was saying because they immediately tried to kill him for saying it, since to call yourself God was blasphemy punishable by death. Jesus is letting them know that since the creator and ruler of the universe is present, what should they fear from a storm? Ever the impetuous one, Peter replies, “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus replies, “come.” Now consider for a moment the faith it took for Peter to get out of the boat and try to walk on raging water in the middle of a storm! This would go against every conceivable human instinct. I can relate to their fear because I too was once in a small boat on a large lake when a storm hit. The boat was being pitched and tossed every which way and I was hanging on for dear life. The thought of being cast in the water was terrifying and I thought I was going to drown. Thankfully, the storm subsided and I survived. Yet we are told, “Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.” Peter takes a lot of knocks for denying Christ three times when the chips were down, but he was certainly not without faith. He steps out on the surface of a churning sea and walks toward Jesus. He was entrusting his life to Jesus--which is the sum and substance of what we call faith. Then a problem arose.

[14:30] “but when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” as soon as Peter took his eyes off Jesus, his faith began to waver. And what was it that drew Peter’s attention away from Jesus? It was what was going on around him: the wind and the raging sea. Now we need to stop and ask ourselves a question. Are we not a lot like Peter? As long as we keep our eyes fastened on Jesus, we are fine. But as soon as we begin to consider what’s going on around us, we are afraid. Like what’s going on around us right now. For Peter, the wind and the raging waters around him were signs of impending death and hell. For us, the pandemic, the political warfare and the rioting going on around us are signs of impending civil war and anarchy—maybe even the collapse of our system of government. When we set our minds on worldly things, we take our eyes off Jesus. And then our faith begins to waver.

[14:31] “immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” We need to hear these words that Jesus spoke to Peter not as an accusation, but as a suggestion to consider what it is that causes us to doubt. It’s simply a matter of where we direct our attention. If we focus on what’s going on in the world around us, we’re treading on dangerous waters because it will always include things that can make us anxious and fearful. And over time, anxiety and fear will lead to desperation and desperation will lead to despair. The world, after all, is a vale of tears. But if we keep our eyes fixed on our savior, his hand will always be reaching out to lift us up. It’s just a matter of where we direct our attention. I had another “near-drowning” experience when I was in the fifth grade.

I was invited to a birthday party at a swimming pool. It was hosted by a woman named Mrs. Nash. I didn't know how to swim and so I always spent my time in swimming pools either at the shallow end of the pool or hanging on to the bank of the pool when I ventured into the deep end. While I was in the deep end that day, a boy from the fourth grade named Carl Rainey swam over to talk to me. After a few moments he shoved off and swam back across to the other side. I don't know if it was because it embarrassed me that a kid a year younger than I was could swim or what, but when Carl shoved off, I shoved off after him. So there I was, three or four feet from the bank in the deep end, unable to swim. I panicked. I started thrashing around in the water trying to stay up and I was sure that I was going to drown. Then I looked up and there was Mrs. Nash standing on the bank and holding out her hand to me. I took it and she drew me in. Whenever I read this passage of scripture, the image of her holding out her hand comes to mind. Our lives as Disciples of Christ are sea-crossings riddled with storms. But Jesus is always there, his hand is always reaching out, and he is always saying: "you of little faith: why did you doubt?" Amen.