

Sometimes the headlines in the newspapers have unintended meanings. For example, when I was in Fayetteville, the site of Fort Bragg Army Base and Pope Air Force Base, I frequently saw headlines like “Army kills Pope.” Here are some others:

- **Something Went Wrong In Jet Crash, Expert says
- **Miners Refuse to Work after Death
- **Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
- **Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
- **New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
- **Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
- **Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead

OK, let’s get dig into this rich, rich gospel text – one of my favorites. We could talk about this text for HOURS! Now doesn’t that make you GLAD that I only preach about 15 minutes?! And for those of you who count points – so you know when to wake up – there are going to be points sprinkled throughout the background as I try to unfold it. So just relax, and enjoy. Or endure, as the case may be.....! Just remember that suffering is good for the soul!

In the opening scene, Jesus physically separates Himself from both the crowds and the disciples. The disciples suggested that Jesus dismiss the crowds so they could feed themselves. But Jesus dismisses the crowds only AFTER HE has fed them. He also MAKES the disciples get into a boat. He may be pushing them off into missionary activity, but HE is staying behind. He will be distant from those who follow Him. Get that – He is sometimes DISTANT from us.

Then Jesus ascends the mountain, a symbol of closeness to God, and opens Himself in prayer. Although the mountain top may be closer to God, geographically it is the point farthest away from the lake where the disciples are struggling. The disciples in the boat are a symbol of the church – remember the name of this main part of the church is NAVE, from the Latin nave, or boat. The disciples-in-the-boat are experiencing tumult, resistance, and danger. The cosmic images of wind and waves symbolize the social forces that are both resisting the teachings of Jesus and openly persecuting the disciples. They are in trouble, and Jesus is not physically with them.

BUT, Jesus is at prayer, and through prayer He is in the presence of God AND through the presence of God, He is able to be with His disciples. This situation parallels the stormy conditions of the early Church, the present-day church -- and our COVID 19 world. This spiritual presence of the risen Christ is especially important in times of crisis. So what follows is a training lesson for disciples in faith and fearlessness. When we are terrified of the storm, Jesus always comes to us, walking on the sea.

And note that Jesus is unbidden, yet He comes, and we often make the same mistake as they did – we don’t recognize Him! They mistake Him for a ghost. The text says that Jesus comes to His disciples walking upon the sea, a prerogative reserved for the-God-who-made the seas. Therefore, the tumult of the seas does

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not have power over Him. No tumult has power over Him. He strides over the waves just as He strides over the troubles of our world.

And that funny little detail -- that this all happens between 3 and 6 am. This is often a very bleak time when we are struggling with something. In the scriptures, it's called the night watch. Remember Matthew writes for a Jewish audience. They would have all caught the line from our Exodus story at the Easter Vigil. "In the night watch, just before dawn..." (Ex 14:24) It is the time when God rescued Israel by dividing and then closing the waters of the Red Sea. The resurrected Jesus has the same power as God, and rescues His people once again, and AT THE SAME TIME, when WE find ourselves in bleak times.

Note that the disciples mistake Jesus coming to rescue them -- for a ghost who has come to threaten them. The fact they see Jesus but apprehend a ghost conveys the difficulty in discerning the resurrected presence of Jesus. Jesus identifies Himself as I AM -- the literal translation of the Greek of the name of God from the Old Testament. I AM functions to ground Jesus in the reality of God and assures us that we are dealing with the real Jesus, albeit Jesus in a new form. Therefore, courage should replace fear, for the presence of God is greater than all the forces that threaten the life of His disciples. HEAR THAT? His presence is greater than all the forces that threaten us. We need to keep reminding one another of this in our current crazy, Covid crisis.

Peter once again functions as a foil for all of us. He asks Jesus that if it is truly Him, then to command Peter to come to Jesus on the water. Peter takes courage and calls Jesus 'Lord,' thus recognizing that Jesus is one with God. But he requests further confirmation. If it is not a ghost, if it is the empowering presence of God in Jesus, then Jesus will do what Jesus always does. He will communicate His abilities to His disciples. He will show them how to deal with fear the way He deals with fear. But Peter cannot presume this ability or arrogantly try to appropriate it. It has to be done according to the way of Jesus.

Peter requests, Jesus commands and Peter obeys. In obeying, Peter will enter into the mystery of the reality and ability of Jesus. He will make the power of Jesus his own, but he will never replace the power of Jesus with his own power. The master-disciple relationship remains forever, even as the disciple grows in the powers of the master. This is a wonderful corrective to our American arrogance that we can do things by ourselves, that we do not need God -- science will rescue us, or the military, or the economy, or a vaccine, or whatever. NO, God alone can rescue us. But we forget this so easily in our 'can-do' culture. And let's also admit -- this is NOT a HUMBLE culture we live in. We don't want to need ANYONE, let alone GOD. Are we all praying everyday for God to help us through this? If not, we have succumbed to our culture's version of truth rather than the gospel's. We think we can solve this on our own.

Peter does not ask to walk on the water. Rather he requests that Jesus command him to come to Jesus on the water. It is always a journey ever deeper into Christ, a journey that entails the overcoming of fear. This is the proper positioning of "the courage not to be afraid." We have to ask, Jesus has to grant.

Peter courageously obeys the command of Jesus, and initially, with his eyes on Jesus, he is a fearless walker on the waves. But then his consciousness shifts from Jesus to the strong winds. As the strength of the resisting winds fills his mind, it also captures his emotions and he becomes frightened. The growing fear threatens to engulf him. So he cries out to the Lord. Immediately, the Lord stretches out his hand to save him. Could this be a more timely message for us? If we keep our minds on Jesus, we will not be frightened -- we will remind ourselves that someone greater than a president or many, many medical experts -- is in charge.

Jesus' comment and question to Peter is also addressed to us: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Faith is always a struggle, and like Peter, we struggle with sticking to it. Like Peter, we doubt when we allow what threatens us to capture our mind and heart more completely than what calms us – the presence of the Risen Lord. When we allow our focus on the reality of Jesus to be replaced by a preoccupation with the wind and storms – and viruses -- we sink.

The fact that we sink reminds us that our faith is still immature and, in that sense, 'little.' Believe me, mine is little too. I often am sinking. But coming here – back to the boat of the Church, I join you and Jesus – and the forces of resistance do not have their previous powers. I am renewed and lifted up. Together, we try to help one another claim God's ultimate power, and recognize that we are safe as long as Jesus is with us.

But our faith in Jesus must translate into participating in His powers. The point is not to rely on Jesus alone – but to learn and develop the spiritual power and depth that He offers us every moment of our lives. Faith cannot be content with worship and adoration, no matter how important these are. No, faith must push on into understanding and action. Peter may be back in the safety of the boat with His Savior, but he will face another encounter with resistant winds. Welcome to the wind of pandemic.

Finally, to sum up (yeah – this is about to end! The real adventure of faith is learning to take part in Jesus' courage and ability. We need to welcome Christ into the boat, but we also want to lean into the wind. Our failures are not because we desire the wrong thing so much as we are reaching for a higher level of consciousness and action in our life as disciples. Peter does not walk on the water and then sink because he is impetuous and does not know his place. He walks on the water and then sinks because he is learning the path of confronting what threatens life while working with his own fear.

It is the same for us. If we are trying to belong to the kingdom of heaven, struggling to learn how to encounter and calm the terrible, and we cry, "Lord, save me," divine support is always available. The one who says, "Come!" does not abandon those who respond. God has not abandoned us in this time of pandemic.

And this is the adventure of faith, trying to stay so focused on God's enabling presence that the winds do not defeat us. The way the wind works is to create fear. Fear captures the mind and pulls it out of God's presence. This shift in the mind's attention is what it means to doubt. But we know that it is in the nature of a grand task to doubt. Whenever we align ourselves with the divinely guided evolutionary course the world is on, we easily become afraid and lose focus. We are not trying to make a chair or a soup! We are struggling to make world peace, for more accessible educational opportunities for all, for universal health care, for less crime, for just business practices, for humane laws for immigrants and refugees, for less hypocritical religion, for a world of compassion, goodness, forgiveness and love. We pray for this every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, using the language of Matthew's gospel (Mt 6:10) "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ON EARTH as it is in heaven." Let the Church say AMEN. (this homily is adapted from ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, John Shea, p. 246-251)