

# I Doubt It

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

*Large crowds had come together in the wilderness to hear Jesus. He healed the sick among them. Then toward evening he prepared a meal for them using five small loaves of bread and two fish. Five thousand men were fed, never mind women and children.*

Right away [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he sent the crowds away. After he had sent the crowds away, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. He was there alone when evening came.

By then the boat was being battered by waves because of a contrary wind and was a considerable distance from shore. But very early in the morning, he came toward them, walking upon the lake. When the disciples saw him walking upon the lake, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But right away Jesus spoke to them. He said, "Take heart. It's me. Don't be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the water." He said, "Come." And, after getting out of the boat, Peter began to walk upon the water. And he came to Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid. He began to sink, and he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Right away Jesus stretched out his hand to take hold of him. And he said to him, "You with such little faith, why did you doubt?"

When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And the ones in the boat worshiped him. They said, "You really are the Son of God."

## **Children's Story**

I wonder if you remember the story I told you a few months ago about Blondin. Years ago he stretched a tightrope across the rocks and the water and the mist of Niagara Falls, and he walked back and forth on that tightrope.

A few months ago, I asked you if you believed that Blondin could walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. You said, Yes. Then I asked you if you would have trusted him enough to climb onto his back and let him carry you across Niagara Falls on his tightrope. You weren't so sure about that.

When Blondin crossed Niagara Falls on his tightrope, that was just a stunt. But suppose one time it wasn't a stunt.

Suppose that one time you were in danger. And suppose the only way out of danger was for you to climb onto Blondin's back and let him carry you across Niagara Falls – across the rocks and the water and the mist – on his tightrope.

Suppose you believed that Blondin could carry you across, but you didn't trust him enough to climb onto his back. Suppose you had too many doubts about him carrying you across Niagara Falls and to safety.

What do you think Blondin would do? Would he just leave you there in danger? Or would he pick you up and carry you to safety, whether you were ready or not? I wonder.

## **Sermon**

It's a moving and memorable story. Perhaps you remember it. A man has a son, a son with a pain-filled history. An evil spirit takes hold of him, locks his jaw, sends him into convulsions, and tries to burn him or drown him. That has been the story – again and again, at irregular intervals – for his whole life.

The man is desperate to find help for his son. In his desperation, he turns to Jesus. After hearing the story, Jesus assures the father of a good outcome – if only he believes, if only he has faith, if only he trusts. The father answers famously, frankly, honestly, “I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Belief and unbelief lived together in that man’s heart. Faith and doubt lived together in that man’s heart. But we’re not surprised by that. All our resources and all our experience tell us there’s nothing unusual about that mixture of belief and unbelief, of faith and doubt – that there’s nothing unusual about that mixture at all.

**Take Peter as a prominent example.** His faith was exemplary . . . It had been a long night at the oars. Progress across the lake had been painstakingly slow. Peter and the others were weary with exertion and bleary-eyed from exhaustion. That’s when they saw Jesus walking toward them – on the water!

They were afraid, those disciples. Who wouldn’t be? The closer they got to Jesus and the more they saw from Jesus, the more reason they had to be afraid. Jesus was no ordinary, average guy. Strange, unexplainable things happened whenever Jesus was around. And now here he was, walking on water. No wonder they were terrified. But Jesus reassured them, “Take heart. It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

Then Peter spoke up, in faith. And he put his own faith to the test. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the water.” That’s pretty audacious. “Jesus, get me walking on the water, too!” Peter wanted more than to have faith. He wanted to act on his faith. And he did. He stepped out onto the water – like Indiana Jones taking a leap from the lion’s mouth – he stepped out onto the water, and he walked toward Jesus. His faith was intact, fixed on Jesus. And he walked as if he were on dry ground.

Then he noticed the wind, how strong it was. Peter knew that lake well. He knew how dangerous a strong wind could be. He knew how quickly it could churn up the waters. He knew the thin line between safety and danger, between life and death. He noticed the wind, how strong it was. And in that moment his eye was no longer on Jesus. And in that moment he began to sink. In that moment his faith failed him. “You with such little faith,” Jesus said, “why did you doubt?” There we have it, faith and doubt mixed together. Even exemplary faith – the kind of faith that steps out of the boat and onto the water – even exemplary faith has doubt as its constant companion.

**But notice what Peter did with his doubt.** He was afraid of the wind. He began to sink. I suppose he might have started to swim. He could have turned back toward the boat. But he probably knew that would have been a desperate, hopeless tactic. So he opted for another response – to the wind that was pushing everything around, and to the water that was starting to swallow him like a hungry predator.

From the midst of his fear and doubt, Peter cried out to Jesus. “Lord,” he said, “save me!” In his doubt he turned toward the object of his faith. He no longer had faith that he himself could walk on the water, but he had faith that Jesus could save him. Or at least he hoped that Jesus could save him. And he cried out to Jesus. Call it a desperate, hopeful tactic.

What else could Peter have done? It was faith, his faith in Jesus, that got him into such a mess to begin with, out there on the water. What but that same faith could get him out of that mess? Not big faith, though. Not exemplary faith – not the kind of faith that walks on water or moves mountains. But little faith . . . “such little faith.”

Now, what is faith anyway? One translation of Hebrew 11:1 says, “Faith gives substance to our hopes and assures us of unseen realities.” That’s a good translation. But it doesn’t say what faith is. It only says something about what effects faith has.

Here’s what is most central to faith: faith is trust. Faith is trust. For the Christian person and for the Christian community, faith is trust in Jesus Christ. That he is the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). That he is the Lord of heaven and earth, of wind and waves. That he “watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven” (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 1).

This trust, however, is vulnerable – vulnerable because it’s living. This faith, this trust, can be stretched. It can be challenged. It can be shaken. By what we see, what we learn, what we experience. By what we gain or what we lose. By rising tides. By quivering earth. By unfounded boasts. By propaganda.

Peter trusted Jesus, a little bit at least. And he had his doubts, too. Somehow, though, it added up to enough. And he cried out to Jesus.

**And this points us to what matters above all.** It may have been the case that Peter’s doubt was sinking him, but it was not the case that his faith saved him. No. Jesus saved him. Saved him from the wind and the waves. Saved him from his fear and his doubt. Saved him even from his faith, his exemplary faith – “such little faith,” it was!

I understand that there’s some ferment in New Testament studies these days over two or three words in the Greek New Testament: πιστις Ιησου [pistis Iesou] and πιστις Χριστου [pistis Christou]. Is it our “faith in Jesus,” our “faith in Christ”? Or is it the “faithfulness of Jesus,” the “faithfulness of Christ”? The difference may seem like splitting hairs. But there’s more to it. The question is this. At the end of the day, what saves Peter from drowning, his faith in Jesus, or Jesus’ faithfulness to him? At the end of the day, what saves the children of God from judgment and destruction, our faith in Jesus, or Jesus’ faithfulness to us and to his Father’s saving love? At the end of the day, what will save the earth and recreate it, the faith of the church or of any created beings, or the faithfulness of Jesus to the plans of the Creator? Simply put, Jesus saves. (You may have heard that before.)

Here’s the upshot: Doubt is not the end of the world; doubt is not the end of faith. Notice, Jesus saved Peter even though he had “such little faith.” Jesus saved Peter even though he had such obvious doubt.

Do you suppose Jesus requires that your faith be innocent of all doubt? That you not have questions about the senseless evil and suffering in the world? That you never move beyond the uncomplicated faith of your childhood? That you not wonder about something as mysterious and unfathomable as the Holy Trinity? That you never consider that there maybe is no God at all and that everything is some cosmic accident?

Do you suppose Jesus requires you to fix a firm stare on him and lock your eyes there? Never noticing the wind and waves? Never seeing the complicating factors? Never viewing the contrary evidence? Standing constant guard over the windows of your mind, because Jesus cannot stand his ground unless you stand firm?

Do you suppose that’s how it is?

No! No! No! That’s not how it is.

So, have your doubts. Don’t love your doubts, but have them. And if you can, from within those doubts cry out to Jesus. Ask him to stretch out his hand to you and take hold. After all, he rescued Peter in the middle of his doubt. And that man with the mix of belief and unbelief? Jesus made his son well, too.

And if for a time your doubt looms so large as to eclipse your faith, if for a time your doubt looms so large as to keep you from crying out to Jesus – even then I would not despair of hope for you. There’s enough in this story and in the Gospel to warrant good hope. Always with God, there is hope.