

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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Sermon: “*The Hand that Reaches Out First*”

1 Kings 19:9-18 (Elijah encounters the Lord in the still small voice)
Psalm 85:8-13 (The psalmist will listen to God, for He is righteousness & truth)
Romans 10:5-15 (Salvation is for those who confess w/lips & believe in heart)
St. Matthew 14:22-33 (Jesus walks on the water and saves Peter)

Today's Gospel story is one of the most familiar in the New Testament. The disciples are alone in a boat, battered by the wind and waves in the darkness before dawn. Jesus comes to them, walking on the Sea of Galilee. Terrified, they believe they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus answers with words that echo throughout the Gospels: “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*”

Peter, brash and impulsive as always, answers, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus responds simply, “Come.” And for one astonishing moment, Peter does the impossible. He walks on water! Then, as he takes his eyes off Jesus, he notices the wind . . . and becoming frightened, he begins to sink. With perhaps the shortest prayer in Scripture, he cries out, “*Lord, save me!*”

Immediately Jesus reaches out His hand. Not *after* Peter has figured things out. Not *after* Peter has shown more faith. But *immediately*. Jesus never says to Peter, “What were you thinking?” Nor does He admonish him for getting out of the boat. Instead, He asks one gentle question: “*Why did you doubt?*” Notice, Jesus doesn't criticize Peter for leaving the boat, because the only disciple to experience the miracle is the one who *was* willing to step out in faith. The other eleven remained safe and dry. Yes, Peter got drenched, but he also walked on water!

Sometimes we Christians make the mistake of believing faith means certainty. We think faith never questions, never hesitates, never struggles, is never afraid. And so, it's good that this poignant story reminds us how basic fear is to being human; it goes back to the beginning of time. To be human is to experience fear. And sometimes, there seems to be no limit to our fears.

In a “Peanuts” cartoon strip Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickel's worth of psychiatric help. She proceeds to try to pinpoint his particular ‘fear’. “Perhaps,” she says, “you have hypengyophobia, the fear of responsibility.” Charlie Brown says “No.” “Well, perhaps you have ailurophobia, the fear of cats.” “No.” “Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases.” “No.” Exasperated, Lucy shouts, “Well, maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of *everything*!” “Yes!” says Charlie Brown, “That's the one!” Sometimes *we* are afraid of everything. At times we are afraid of ourselves. We are afraid of other people. We are afraid of the future. We are afraid of the past. We are afraid of life. We are afraid of death.* But Peter teaches us otherwise. Faith is not the absence of fear. Faith is deciding that Jesus is more trustworthy than our fears.

There's a story about the great tightrope walker Charles Blondin, who crossed Niagara Falls on a rope in the 19th century holding a chair, and even a stove on which he cooked an omelet and ate it. One day, over 25,000 people gathered to watch him walk more than 1,000 feet across, suspended on a tiny rope 160 feet above the raging waters. He worked without a net or even a safety harness. When he reached the Canadian side, the crowd cheered in admiration. Seeing a man applauding loudly, Blondin asked, “Sir, do you think I could safely carry you across in this wheelbarrow?” “Yes, of course,” the man replied. “Get in,” the Great Blondin said with a smile. The man refused.⁺ However, Blondin was known for carrying his manager, Harry Colcord, across the tightrope above the Niagara Gorge, piggyback on his shoulders.[#]

It's one thing to believe someone *can* do something. It's another thing to entrust yourself to them. That's the difference between admiration and discipleship. Many people admire Jesus. But following Him requires climbing onto His shoulders. Anyone here ever had their dad let them climb up on his shoulders? Mine did. I only allowed him to carry me piggyback because I knew I could trust him to keep me safe and not let me fall. And the view from way up there was terrific!

Throughout the Bible, and in the ancient world, the sea often represented chaos. In today's Gospel story, the disciples are not simply battling bad weather. They are also facing fears that threaten to overwhelm them. We know something about those storms.

Sometimes they are literal; mostly they are circumstantial: Illness, grief, broken relationships, disturbing health diagnoses; financial difficulties. At times we fear the uncertainty of the future. We wake up at three o'clock in the morning with worries that seem far larger in the darkness than they do by daylight. Storms and the anxiety they cause come to every life. But notice something remarkable. Jesus does not prevent the storm. He walks right into it. Our faith does not promise calm seas. It promises the presence of Christ in the midst of rough waters. We only have to look up to see Him.

The late Presbyterian theologian and author Frederick Buechner wrote in his 1973 book *Wishful Thinking* that “faith is an active process and a moving journey rather than a fixed object you own.” Faith is something we *do*—Peter’s faith looked like stepping out of a boat in the middle of a storm at sea. Our faith may look much quieter, and safer. Being present to care for a sick spouse. Choosing forgiveness instead of resentment. Continuing to pray when God seems silent. Keeping hope alive when evidence suggests otherwise. Every one of those moments is its own step into uncertain waters.

And yet, Jesus reached out to Peter before he could disappear beneath the waves. He was there for His disciple. Just so, Jesus is already reaching out to each of us, too. His grace is faster than our failure. There’s another detail in this story we often overlook: St. Matthew says that when Jesus and Peter climb into the boat, *the wind ceases*. Not before—but after.

Sometimes we expect God to calm our circumstances first so that we can have peace. But the Gospel reverses that order. Christ enters the boat first. Then the storm ends. There are times when the outward storm continues much longer than we would like, or think we can stand. Yet Christ’s presence in our boat—our lives—can give us an inward peace the storm cannot destroy. Perhaps the most beautiful words in today’s Gospel passage are Peter’s desperate prayer: “*Lord, save me!*” Three words. No eloquence. No theology. No carefully crafted argument. Just honest, urgent dependence.

Many of us have prayed that prayer. In a hospital waiting room. At the graveside of someone we loved. When a family member was in trouble. When life seemed to be coming apart. And those simple prayers are enough. Because Jesus is not measuring how articulate or sophisticated are our prayers. He is listening for the cry of our hearts, where there are no words.

In Romans 8:26-27 (CEV), we are reminded that God, the Holy Spirit, helps us in our weakness, those times “when we don’t know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words. All of our thoughts are known to God. He can understand what is in the mind of the Spirit, as the Spirit prays for God’s people.” That’s certainly reassuring!

At the end of the story, the disciples worship Jesus and exclaim, “*Truly you are the Son of God.*” Notice, this confession comes *after* the storm. Sometimes our deepest understanding of who Christ is comes only after we have weathered the hardest seasons of our lives. Many Christians can look back on tough times or difficult experiences and say, “I would never have chosen that suffering. But somewhere in the middle of it, I discovered Christ in ways I never knew before.” The storm became the place where faith deepened.

As we come to the Lord’s Table today, we come much like Peter. Not with perfect faith. Not without fears. Not because we have everything figured out. We come because when we begin to sink, we can trust Whose hand will reach for us first. The good news is that Christ’s merciful grip is always stronger than our fear. And that is enough.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we confess that like Peter, we look around at the fierce winds and high waves of our own lives, and we get scared. Our faith falters, and we feel ourselves begin to sink beneath the weight of our anguish, fear, and doubts. But we thank You that Jesus does not leave us to drown. Thank You that the moment we cry out, “Lord, save me!” Your hand is immediately stretched out to catch us. Thank You that Your grip on us is stronger than our grip on You. In the coming days, help us to fix our eyes entirely on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. When the storms rage this week, let us hear your comforting voice saying, ‘Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.’ Calm our anxious hearts, strengthen our weak knees, and give us the courage to keep walking on the water by Your grace. In Jesus’ mighty and saving name we pray. *Amen.*

¹ “Matthew 14:22-33,” via <sermons@sermons.com> 4 August 2026

² “Get in the Wheelbarrow,” 28 February 2023, John Barrett Leadership <<https://johnbarrettleadership.com/get-in-the-wheelbarrow/>> 4 August 2026.

³ Sherrie Eatman, “The Hero of Niagara and His Wheelbarrows,” 10 January 2019, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/caring-for-our-collections/the-hero-of-niagara-and-his-wheelbarrows> 4 August 2026.