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Pentecost 12 – Matthew 14:22-33 – Why Do You Doubt?

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It seems like a simple question – now, at least, when Jesus is here and the sea is calm and the sky is beginning to brighten in the east. The rest of the night, though, the question was anything but simple, as a sharp wind howled and violent waves roared for the better part of nine hours against that lone, small fishing boat. But now all that's in the past, and Peter stands sopping wet and still trying to catch his breath next to his Savior, who asks, "*Why did you doubt?*" Peter's speechless. "Why did I doubt? Where should I start? Are you serious, Jesus?"

You can see where he's coming from, can't you? The disciples were all alone out there all night, because Jesus sent them off by themselves while he stayed back to dismiss the crowd. It'd been a long day – they must have been physically and mentally exhausted, even before they left shore. They set sail at sunset and what should have been a leisurely trip of maybe a few hours took a turn for the worse when suddenly a storm swept in from the north, right where they were heading. They were stranded for hours in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, over a mile from the closest shore, in the dead of night, rowing for their lives against this storm that relentlessly sent winds and waves crashing against their tiny, little boat. A number of them were fishermen that made their living on this sea, but that experience did them no good in a storm like this; in fact, it probably did just the opposite because they knew so well how much danger they were in. Make no mistake, they had good reason to be terrified – at any time in conditions like these they could have been tossed overboard or swamped. In either case, a watery grave was their fate.

And then, all of the sudden in the deep darkness they spotted a shadowy figure coming toward the boat on the surface of the water. What else could it be than a ghost? No human being they'd ever seen did anything like that. They must have thought for sure that it was all over for them right then. And can any of you look me in the eye and tell me that if you were in Peter's situation after he climbed out of the boat, with nothing but water underneath your feet and wind and waves bearing down on you, that you wouldn't think twice? It seems like Peter had some pretty good reasons to doubt.

So then why do *we* doubt? Maybe none of you have ever been caught in a storm in the middle of the night on a fishing boat a few miles out to sea, but when's the last time you felt like your life was spinning out of control and you were drowning? We've got plenty of our own storms to deal with, don't

we! How about when you go to the mailbox and find a letter from the bank that says you're so overdue on payments that the repo truck is coming or they're going to foreclose on your house? Who wouldn't doubt when the only thing more empty than your cupboards and your refrigerator is your checking account, and you can't find a job or enough hours to change that? And there's nothing easier to drown in than addiction. Sex, drugs, gambling, alcohol... even unhealthy food. I just can't quit on my own. Sure, God's gotten me through rough patches in my life before, but I don't know about this one. I'm in really deep here, and I just don't see how there's any getting out of this. Let's be realistic. It seems like we have plenty of reasons to doubt, too.

But Jesus looks at Peter and he looks at you and he tells you just the opposite when he asks, "*Why did you doubt?*" What are we missing? What was Peter missing? Let's start over again, even before the disciples ran into rough seas that night. What had Peter seen from Jesus that would give him reason not to doubt him, even in the face of overwhelming odds? Let's start just a few short hours beforehand, when Jesus fed and satisfied all those 5,000+ people with only a handful of loaves and a couple fish. What did that miracle teach him? And not just that miracle, but what about all those other miracles, those people that Jesus healed of sicknesses and disabilities? What about the *other* time Jesus saved the disciples from a storm on the Sea of Galilee? Those times taught Peter that this was no ordinary man standing before him – this was the very Son of God, who had the power to overcome anything that threatened him.

But what about when Jesus sent the disciples off into the night on the sea alone? After Jesus dismissed that crowd, it wasn't like he was just sitting around reading the newspaper. He went up on a mountainside by himself to pray, no doubt for his disciples and followers. Peter may not have known exactly what Jesus did or why, but he should have known him well enough to trust that whatever he was doing, he was doing *for their good*.

And when that storm was churning and things looked bleak, what did Jesus do? He came to his disciples, he encouraged them with his powerful Word, and he tread down underfoot what they most feared. Maybe it wasn't as soon as they would have liked, but when the time was right, when they most needed him, their Savior walked out there on the water to reassure them that they were never alone: "*Take courage! It is I [and not a ghost]. Don't be afraid.*" Peter wasn't in danger, despite how it looked. Jesus had total power over that storm; again, he should have known. Why did he doubt?

And even when it seemed like Peter's faith was surging, even when he climbed out of that boat on Jesus' command without a second thought and started walking with his eyes fixed on his Savior, doubt was still lingering in the back of his mind, waiting to rear its ugly head – sad that those two always seem to go hand in hand for us. Peter's faith faltered as he lost his focus – he saw the storm raging around him, and forgot that Jesus was in total control of it and him. But just as he was about to go under, Peter managed to choke out a simple but beautiful prayer: “*Lord, save me!*” Immediately, it says – Immediately! – Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Peter's faith may have been little and weak, but that didn't stop Jesus, because the object of his faith was great and strong. No, Jesus picked him up, put him under his arm, and led him back to the boat, to safety. Jesus proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was Peter's Savior, and there's nothing that he couldn't do for him.

So why would Peter doubt someone who showed him miracles time and time again, who delivered him from temptation and prayed for him, who walked to him on the water, who enabled *him* to walk on the water, and who had total power over that which he most feared? Peter had no excuse for his doubt, and hopefully you saw enough of yourselves in him to realize that you don't have any excuse, either. Peter wasn't the only one with little faith; honestly, we're in that same boat too often. When we rationalize that all our doubts are not only reasonable but really very understandable, it's like we slap God right in the face and turn our backs on his promises that he can take care of us better than we can take care of ourselves. Though he proves himself to us time and time again and bails us out of situations that we never could ourselves, we still deny God the credit he deserves, and so the truth is, we deserve to be left to drown. That would be the only right punishment for us who constantly fail to acknowledge him as our only Savior from the troubles of this world.

But thank God that our doubt doesn't negate his grace and faithfulness. Peter was right to stand there before Jesus speechless. There was no legitimate excuse for his doubt. The disciples thought they had plenty of reasons to doubt; so do we. The problem is that they didn't adequately weigh that pile of reasons against the single, towering reason they had to trust, and that was Jesus.

And is it any different for us? Everything Jesus did for believers back then, he still has the power to do now for us. All those miracles we hear about in the Bible? That's the God who watches over you day and night. That's the God who commands his thousands upon thousands of angels to guard you in

all your ways. Jesus prayed for the disciples? He prays for you, too. In fact, he's in heaven right now, interceding for you with the Father. Every sin you commit, even when you doubt him as your Savior and protector, he's still there to say, “Charge that to my account, because I paid for it with my own blood.”

And no doubt those disciples did feel very alone out there on the water, but really Jesus was there with them the whole time. And you know – he's here with us, too, in just the same way. Maybe we can't see him, but he promised that he will be with us always, even to the very end of the age; he's present with us here when we gather for worship and when we join in the Lord's Supper; and he makes his home in our hearts through faith. Stop for a second and listen. The winds in your life might be howling and the waves might be crashing, but listen to his Word and you will hear his voice: “*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*” He will be here for you through all the storms in your lives, even the foolish and sinful ones that are our own fault and of our own making. No, rather than letting us sink as we deserve, Jesus instead comes to you in the middle of even your biggest storms to take you by the hand and assure you that he can get you through whatever troubles you.

We might not understand why our God sometimes waits to help us until we've been struggling all night or we're neck deep in water. He might not calm our storms when we wish he would – the disciples had to wait nine long hours before he calmed theirs! But just maybe he lets us go to the point where all we can do is cry for help so that when it's through, we realize that much more clearly how much our lives totally depend on Jesus, and all along our faith in him was the only thing that mattered. And when we think we're about to drown, the same Son of God who holds the whole universe in the palm of his hand reaches out to grab hold of us and pull us back to the safety of his gracious care, where nothing can touch us. Whether the storms we go through last a day, a year, or until we get to heaven, whether they're only a passing shower or a category-5 hurricane, we can be sure of this: there is nothing in all this world that can separate us from the love of God in our Savior Jesus Christ.

“So why did you doubt?” The question didn't seem so simple a few minutes earlier, but now Jesus had silenced Peter's every doubt and had given him instead every reason to believe. Now, the question was so simple he didn't even need to answer it. So Peter just stood there... silent, speechless, and dripping. The only thing left to do was worship this man who came to him in the storm with all that love and power. Lord Jesus, truly you are the Son of God. Amen.