

Thomas R. Cook
Sermon #481 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, PA
8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 10, 2008

“Walking on Water”

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33; 13 Pentecost A, Proper 14 (RCL)

All right. Let's go directly to the problem this morning, because my guess is that most of you are thinking about it anyway. (I know I am.) Every educated or modestly observant individual knows that the Laws of Physics and the properties of Fluid Dynamics do not provide for adequate buoyancy of a solid object resting upon a liquid mass unless the solid object is dimensionally configured in such a way as to displace on the surface an amount of that liquid which weighs as much as the object which seeks to rest upon it. In short, an upright human being won't float upon his or her feet on the surface of a lake.

So now we are left with the untenable conundrum of faith: either the disciples are deceived by some slight of hand (or foot, in the case) on the part of Jesus, or the disciples themselves seek to deceive with a grand tale of incredible and impossible proportion, or we are left with the unacceptable conclusion that Jesus is indeed unlike us, despite the protestation of the doctrine of the Incarnation to the contrary, that Jesus is indeed one of us, instead now appearing to have within his constitution some element of divinity allowing him to be able to overcome the laws of Physics in ways which simply are, to us ordinary

human beings, not possible. And, finally, the ultimate failure of Peter to achieve the unachievable through his own lack of faith, causes those of us who want to follow Jesus no end of guilt, because we must not have enough faith either, or we could indeed stroll across the Schuylkill.

Did I state that succinctly enough? Because having named an obvious problem with our struggles with the nature of miracles in our time of modern science and extraordinary knowledge of the physical world, I want to leave behind the utterly inconclusive arguments that have captured so much time and imagination of so many preachers in order to say I wasn't there, so I can't speak to what I might have seen, but I can speak to what it is I hear in this magnificent story of mystery and adventure and danger and excitement that is left to us by our ancestors in the faith for what I gather to be our own good.

To reach the heart of this story, we have to go backward a bit from the time of the lake-top stroll to a far less impressive yet far more consequential moment in the mountains. You see, Jesus, having left behind the crowd of thousands fed by the few loaves and fishes, has headed off to be alone, the disciples taking the early boat across the lake. Jesus leaves them for the purpose of prayer. He is seeking time to be alone in the presence of the power of God, which is, perhaps, the best definition of prayer we know anyway. And as the chances of the weather would have it, while he prayed, a storm had arisen to batter his disciples in their boat.

Now we know that despite our hope and belief in the presence of God with us, storms in life do arise. We are readily assailed by the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of getting our daily bread and a roof over our heads, or providing for our children or our parents, struggling with the unexpected illnesses that overshadow us or our friends. Life is not always smooth sailing, and sometimes it's downright dangerous.

But just as the disciples reach the limits of their hope, Jesus appears to them when and where it seems impossible that he could be present. They are confused, mystified, and doubtful, and, frankly, afraid. Peter requests proof it is Jesus, and nearly loses his life for it, not being equal upon his own to the challenge of the storm. But he did try to walk on the water. He gave it a go, and he failed, and it is Jesus, after all, who takes him into the boat and the storm subsides while he allays their fears.

Folks, we try to walk on water all the time. We test ourselves. We test God. Maybe we take on too much to handle with our work and think we can do it all. Maybe we believe we can handle our illnesses on our own; no need to trouble others with our condition. Or maybe we harbour some secret sin that we try to avoid year after year, though it keeps us sinking. Or we hold that grudge against somebody we once loved, and we think it won't take us down. Who do we think we are? Can we just walk on the water and handle everything on our own? If we are going to try, we ought to at least be well prepared. Or

have we forgotten what Jesus was doing before he ventured onto the waves? Jesus' impossible miracle of walking on the water did not happen before the utterly achievable miracle of prayer and communion with God. And still we may struggle and sink up to our necks and act like the frightened people aboard the boat are crying out: "Don't just stand there. Do something!" Yet, I imagine that Jesus might look to them and say: "Don't just do something, people. Stand there." *"Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid."* And without further ado, Jesus does indeed lift Peter and us from the waves of death, bringing peace within the chaos all around.

This is a story about the power of prayer. It is a story about having faith that Christ is near and present to us in the midst of the storm. It's a story that demands we know Jesus as the Messiah of God. I am not saying this story is some empty allegory, and I am not saying that things didn't happen just the way we heard them, impossible as they may seem. But I agree with William Sloane Coffin when he says:

*Miracles do not a Messiah make. But a Messiah can do miracles. If you ask me if Jesus literally raised Lazarus from the dead, literally walked on water and changed water into wine, I will answer, "For certain, I do not know. But this I do know: faith must be lived before it is understood, and the more it is lived, the more things become possible." I can also report that in home after home I have seen Jesus change beer into furniture, sinners into saints, hate-filled relations into loving ones, cowardice into courage, the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. In instance after instance, life after life, I have seen Christ be "God's power unto salvation," and that's miracle enough for me. **

* William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 10.