

“Unraveled by Uncertainty”

Matthew 14:22-33

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A few years ago Beth and I went to the big island in Hawaii with my family for an amazing vacation. One day we took a leisurely drive around the island and found Ka Lae, the southernmost point of the United States. We got out of our car to explore. There was a big cliff with a setup so that ships could pull up things they were delivering to the island. Because people from the ships needed to get to land, there was a long ladder hanging off the cliff into the ocean far below. This made it possible for brave folks to jump off the cliff and climb back up the ladder. The internet says it is about a 40 foot drop off the cliff and it looked twice that far when you were standing at the top of it.

Now, I am not brave. I have never jumped out of an airplane. As a kid I did not go up the high dive at the community pool. I don't even climb ladders to above the first floor of my house. I figure I'm tall enough. I don't need to add any more distance between me and the ground. I tentatively sat toward the end of the cliff and watched folks of all ages jump off. I heard shouts of excitement and saw them climb up and some jump again. I don't know what came over me, but it started to look like an amazing adventure. I wanted to join them. I wanted to be brave and free and jump into the ocean. It took me almost an hour to work up my nerve but I stripped down to my bathing suit and lined up on the edge of the cliff. And I jumped.

For the first three seconds it was exhilarating. Then I realized I was still falling in the air toward an uncertain fate and I became terrified. Instead of being relaxed and calm, I clenched up my whole body. When I splashed into the ocean, I felt pain travel up the spine of my back. Somehow I climbed up the wobbly ladder and made it to safety, vowing never to do something like that again. I towed off and we headed back down the road on our journey, but the pain I felt in my spine didn't go away. Into the night and next day it felt worse and worse until I could only lay on my stomach for relief. I would later learn that I herniated a disc in my back and that it was a result of clenching up in fear instead of allowing my body to relax as I hit the water. I spent the next week of our vacation riding around on a very attractive blowup donut and spent the longest airplane ride of my life going home in agony.

Which is all to say, this story of Jesus walking on water and Peter attempting to do the same and falling down when he fills with fear, is very relatable. We think the miracle is that Jesus walked on water, but the real miracle is that Peter was able to for as long as he did before panicking and sinking. What would have happened if he didn't let doubt and uncertainty get the best of him? What wells of strength and purpose would he have discovered inside himself as he walked alongside Jesus on the water, turning the impossible into the possible?

What message would he have learned about God's presence beside us even when it feels impossible or hard to imagine? When our uncertainty and doubt and fear start to unravel us, we are called back to our center. To lean into what grounds us, what gives us strength, what helps us to relax our bodies enough to protect ourselves as we jump into the unknown? Peter heard Jesus' voice say, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." When he doubted himself and his faith and began to sink, Jesus grabbed him and pulled him up out of the water.

I wonder if we can imagine this for ourselves. Of feeling Jesus' presence beside us when we begin to sink from the weight of the world or when we doubt whether we can face the next impossible challenge set before us. Can we find something within us or beside us or among us that says, "Be encouraged! God is here. Don't be afraid."

Can we at least have the relief knowing that when we do begin to struggle and doubt, Jesus will find his way to us and pull us out of the storm. That might be in the form of a friend who calls at exactly the right moment. A colleague who asks "How are you doing?" and then pauses to really listen. A sign of hope in backyards with blooming flowers and birds arriving from the south. A book that speaks the wisdom you need to hear. A moment of meditation that clears the doubts and helps bring you back to your core strength.

Be encouraged. God is here with us, wherever we are, whatever we are going through. Don't be afraid. Or be afraid - we're all human and fear seems to be a part of the package - but know that you will be pulled out of the fear. That God is at work to bring us healing and hope and peace once more. The miracle isn't that Jesus walked on water, or that Peter walked on water. Maybe the miracle is that God keeps showing up in our lives and pulling us out of the deep, dangerous waters, again and again and again. Amen.