

Over the Gunwale

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. But by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

What are we to make of Peter? The impetuous one. The man who, more often than not in the pages of the New Testament, seems to lack resolve. When Jesus asked him who others said he was, Peter affirmed the divinity of Jesus. And then in return Jesus declared that Peter, whose name means "Rock," would be the foundation for the Church.

A friend of mine, a biblical scholar, refers to Peter as “Rocky.” I like that. I like it in part because it suggests a playfulness that I think Jesus intended when he designated Peter as head of the Church. Peter, as we know, was anything but solid. He grandly boasted that he would never betray Jesus, and then, at the crucial moment, Peter denied Jesus not merely once, but three times. Rocky was anything but solid. But the larger message here was that Jesus was willing to entrust his Church, his entire earthly legacy, to fallible human beings like Peter – and, by extension, to flawed human beings like us.

And, if we think about it for a moment, Peter – Rocky – is not all that different from us. We too are impetuous and boastful. We make grand claims of fidelity and then, at the crucial moment, we dither and collapse like a cheap suitcase. Our faith is lacking, and so is our courage.

And yet there’s something oddly admirable about Peter. In today’s Gospel, the disciples had spent the entire night on the Sea of Galilee while Jesus was off on the mountain in prayer. Apparently it was a stormy night; Matthew tells us that “the boat, battered by waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.” The Greek word here, *basanizo*, literally means torture or torment; figuratively, it suggests severe distress. So the disciples had endured a stormy and difficult night. Toward morning, Jesus approached, walking on the water. The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus tried to calm them: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

And who answers at that terrified moment? It’s Peter. The lone voice calling out of the boat and into the inky darkness was Peter’s. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Peter is testing, trying to determine who’s out there. And he’s willing to put himself on the line – or, more precisely, over the gunwale – to see who’s lurking there in the darkness. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Jesus says, simply, “Come.” And then Peter thrusts himself out of the boat and onto the waves. Not *into* the waves, mind you, but *onto* the waves. Matthew tells us that Peter walked on the water.

For a few steps at least. And then he lost his nerve, he took his eyes off of Jesus, and he sank into the indigo waters.

We have no evidence that Peter knew how to swim or even how to tread water. True, he was a fisherman, but that was no guarantee that he was proficient in such matters. Besides, the text says that the weather was stormy, and it was still dark. Peter, sinking now into the foamy darkness of the water, cries out, “Lord, save me!”

Those who have studied drowning say that it is terrifying. It begins with panic, as you feel yourself utterly enveloped and surrounded by the water. And then suffocation as you struggle for oxygen that isn’t there, and that gives way to asphyxiation and, finally, to cardiac arrest.

No wonder Peter, struggling against the inexorable pull of the deep, cries out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus extends his hands and pulls Peter to safety.

Most of the time when this story is told, the lesson is Peter’s lack of faith. We should do better, the preacher admonishes. We should have faith, more faith than Peter exhibited there on the stormy waves of the Galilean Sea.

But I’m never quite sure what that means, to have more or better or more resilient faith. Does that mean I should take more risks, confident that Jesus will rescue me from whatever predicament I encounter? Should I jump out of my canoe and onto Long Island Sound and expect a kind of supernatural buoyancy that ensures that even my socks will stay dry?

No, I don’t think the lesson here is Peter’s lack of faith. So let me turn this story slightly so that we can view it from a different angle. Let’s focus on the fact that it was Peter, and Peter alone, who called out into the darkness. It

was Peter, and Peter alone among the other disciples, who was willing to vault over the gunwale and onto the waves to see if it was indeed Jesus there in the darkness, and not merely an apparition.

That takes a lot of faith, I think, especially on the part of someone who couldn't tread water. None of the other disciples in the boat exhibited that kind of faith.

I think the lesson here is that we find faith, we know Jesus, only in our moments of suffering and abandonment. When we feel ourselves caught in the undertow and sinking beneath the waves. When the pain of our desperate lives threatens to suffocate us, Jesus says "Come" and reaches out his hands.

What is it that Peter saw and the others didn't? I suspect that, however briefly, Peter sensed in Jesus a kindred spirit, someone he could trust, someone of compassion and understanding. A fellow sufferer, someone he could follow to the end of the earth, onto the choppy waters of the Sea of Galilee, and finally up that long trek to Golgotha. Peter recognized the brokenness in Jesus, and he understood instinctively that he could trust him.

Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen captures this scene pretty well in the second verse of "Suzanne":

And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said "All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them."

And what did Peter see in Jesus that the others didn't yet grasp? Leonard Cohen again:

But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone
And you want to travel with him
And you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you'll trust him
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind.

At the conclusion of today's Gospel, Jesus does indeed chide Peter for insufficient faith, and that should not surprise us for faith is always a work in progress. But let's place this in context. Peter was the sole disciple willing to jump out of the boat and into the inky horizon, not quite knowing what he would find there in the darkness. Peter alone among the other disciples was willing to take the risk, to make that leap of faith, because he believed that the specter there in the darkness would sustain him in his own frailty and brokenness. Because he knew, intuitively, that faith – true faith – comes only at the moment when you feel yourself sinking beneath the waves. “Only drowning men could see him.”

Traveling blind. Vaulting out of the safety of the boat and into the darkness and sinking, sinking like a rock beneath the waves. That is the element of true faith, the paradoxical freedom that comes in our moment of weakness and panic when we reach out and find a hand there in the darkness.

And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said “All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them.”

The two moments are separated, of course, by time and space. But I don't think it's difficult to imagine Peter, bobbing on the waves in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus, looking down from his lonely wooden tower. And in that moment of desperation and agony and transcendence, the two of them, Peter the Rock and Jesus the Sailor, lock eyes. They share their moment of suffering, and Jesus, once again, reaches out his arms, and says "Come."

Only drowning men will see him.

Eight Sunday after Pentecost
August 7, 2011
Christ Church
Middle Haddam, Connecticut