

## Walking On Water

One commentator on today's gospel was bemoaning this particular lesson.

He went on and on about how unlike other miracle stories, which result in people being healed or restored or filled with bread, this story seems like a Jesus magic show: sort of like Jesus just showing off his divinity.

But frankly, I think that fellow has, if you'll pardon the pun, missed the boat.

Instead, today's gospel really does take us straight to the heart of our faith in a way matched perhaps only by the crucifixion and resurrection.

Bob Capon, an Episcopal priest, likes to talk about this analogy to the Christian life.

He says that the common grasp on Christianity is like folks swimming at the beach when the ocean suddenly gets rough.

The life guard, whose name happens to be Jesus, starts yelling at everyone to get out so they can be safe.

Lots of folks listen and are lolling around the beach when suddenly a ten year old boy yells out that a little girl is still in the ocean, and she's in trouble.

The lifeguard races out into the ocean, grabs the little girl, who (for the sake of some drama) has stopped breathing.

CPR is performed, and she survives.

Everyone is pleased, thanks Jesus for his heroic rescue operation, and then, folks get back to their picnics and games.

Some will talk about how stupid the girl was to be in the water in the first place, others will comment on the rescue, while still others will chalk it up to an interesting day at the beach.

That, says Fr. Capon, is the common view of our faith.

People in trouble are rescued while the rest of us look on, throw some judgment around and chalk it all up to a good day when the rescue succeeds.

But that's not Christianity.

Using the same story, Capon goes on to observe, we still have the Jesus lifeguard warning everyone to get out of the rough surf.

We still have the ten year old hollering about the floundering girl.

But this time, when the lifeguard goes out to save the little girl, they both go under.

Both girl and lifeguard drown.

When the people go back to the lifeguard tower, they find a note from the lifeguard saying: "The little girl is safe in my death."

Today, Jesus comes on the waves to his frightened church, the waves symbolizing chaos and death and disorder, and Peter, perhaps for the first time, really does get it when the "it" is discipleship.

Peter has an epiphany, an insight, a revelation, that to follow Jesus with all our heart and mind and soul really does mean we can walk on water, if just for a few moments, if just for a little while.

And so he does; and though he falters, he is immediately grabbed by Jesus, who, though chiding Peter for his little faith, must have been smiling as he said it.

But the triumph of those few moments isn't the last word about Peter and discipleship.

Years later, legend has it, in the 60's AD, Peter is fleeing Rome because of Emperor Nero's persecution of the church, and as he flees through the outskirts of Rome, Peter is met by Jesus on the road, and Jesus tells Peter, now is the time when someone will tie a belt around you and take you where you'd rather not go: turn around, go back to Rome - which is exactly what Peter does, and he is arrested, tortured, crucified and killed.

While there is much to be said for those moments in our faith when we feel on top of the world, when we are experiencing the wonderful highs of peace or joy or love - the rubber meets the road in our faith not when we are overcoming the depths, but when we succumb to the depths.

We don't have to look far to see the depths.

Whether it is that quake in China a week ago or the ebola virus killing hundreds in Africa or the Middle East that is remaking itself into who knows what to the depths much closer to home: those depths in which our friends Kathy and Carl Crosier swim as they come to grips with Carl's late stage cancer, the destruction and injuries caused by this weekends storms, yes indeed, the depths surround us.

Yet even in the very teeth of the depths, there is Jesus, reminding us, as he reminded them: "I am."

While our translation has Jesus telling his friends: "Don't be afraid, it is I" the literal translation is "Don't be afraid, I am."

"I am" is the name God gives to Moses in the desert at the burning bush.

"I am" is the unutterable name of God: in Hebrew it is the sound of a breath; and so it should be, because the very air that we breathe is the breath of God, the very air that keeps us alive from minute to minute is the kind, all pervasive, mercifully given breath of God that sustains, upholds and supports us.

Perhaps as Elijah discovers today, as we might discover in a world full of earthquakes and fires and floods, that God is not found in such things; such things are the work of nature or the misguided works of humanity, but God, God is found in life and in death, whether walking on the water or sinking like a drowning child under its wave, God is always that still small sound, the sound of a breath, the sound of silence, who never, ever lets us go.

And one thing more.

This story whispers that if we want to come face to face with Jesus, perhaps we need to climb out of the safety of the boat, and head straight away into the sea of other peoples lives, particularly the lives of those who are not like us; trusting that Jesus is there, just around the corner, leading the way.

As one pastor put it when talking about the decline in church membership: "the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." Feasting on the Word, Year A, V. III, 335-6.

Or as Bishop Willimon says it:

If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would not have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder of too many of us are merely splashing around in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies that if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out onto the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture." Id at 336.

Taking that step out into the storm, it is then that we might discover, as St. Paul so gently reminds us today, that indeed: "The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."

