

**Surface Tension**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 10A  
*Matthew 14:22-33*

When I was a boy we used to visit my grandmother's home in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. She lived in a house on a hill with a big front porch and a breathtaking view of Grandfather Mountain. At the bottom of the hill was a clear, mountain stream that rushed over smooth, round rocks, and it was there, in one of the still pools at the side of the stream, that I first saw something walk on water. It was a bug, a "water strider" to be exact, but as I watched it make its way across the pool my eyes grew wide with wonder. How did it do that?

My brother Scott explained: "Surface tension," he said. Something about the way the water molecules held together. If you were small enough and light enough, like that bug, the surface of the water would be like a sheet of Saran Wrap; you could just walk from one side to the other. I was fascinated. I filed that information away in my brain so that someday, when someone asked me how bugs could walk on water, I could lift my chin just the way Scott had, give them one of my most knowledgeable looks, and tell them it was "surface tension."

On the surface, there is some tension between what we read in this passage from Matthew 14 and what we see in the world around us. Matthew says that Jesus walked on water, and that—for a little while at least—Peter did too. I don't know about you, but I have never seen a man walk on water. I saw my cousin water-ski barefoot once, but that's not the same thing. That's called *hydroplaning*, when something is moving so fast that it skims across the surface. It seems to defy gravity in the same way an airplane lifts

off the runway and into the sky by skimming on a cushion of air. But if that airplane came to a sudden stop it would drop from the sky, and if that boat had come to a sudden stop my cousin would have sunk like a stone.

This is what observation has taught us, this is what experience has taught us, but this story from Matthew 14 wants to teach us something else, and on the surface at least it seems to want to teach us that once upon a time a man did walk on water. For some people that's a problem. Although they won't usually admit it (especially not in church) there are some sincere Christians who have a hard time believing that things really happened the way Matthew says they did. Luke may have been one of them. Although you find versions of this story in Mark and John you do not find it in the Gospel of Luke. Is it because Luke, the beloved physician, the thoughtful scientist, just couldn't believe it? There's really no way to know that, but we do know this: that, for whatever reason, he left this story out of the gospel he was writing in the same way some people leave it out of the gospel they are reading. They turn the page and skip over it; their rational minds just can't accept it;

They gag on a story too big to swallow.

You know, I haven't always been Baptist. I'm the son of a Presbyterian minister who was the son of a Presbyterian minister. But one day I met a pretty Baptist girl and the rest (as they say) is history. I not only married into her family, I married into her church. Her father was a Baptist minister. And one of the things he told me (with a twinkle in his eye) is that Baptists are people who get together to argue about who believes the Bible more. If that's true, then this would be one of those stories they would argue about. Someone would jab his finger into someone else's chest and ask, "Do you

believe the Bible is true?” *Yes*. “All of it?” *Yes*. “Even that part about Jesus walking on water?” *Yes*. “Do you believe that he did it physically, literally?” *Um...maybe*. “Aha! An unbeliever!” Do you see how quickly well-meaning Christians might divide themselves into those who are able to believe everything in the Bible is literally true and those who have some doubts? They could say, “Here: if you believe the sun stood still as it says in Joshua 10:13 sit on this side of the church. If you’re not sure, sit over there. If you believe a fish swallowed a man as it says in the first chapter of Jonah sit up front, and if you don’t then sit at the back. If you believe Jesus walked on water as it says in Matthew 14 then sit in the balcony, a little closer to heaven, and if you don’t then sit down here, a little closer to the other place.”

They could do that. In fact some Baptists have done that—made belief in the literal truth of Scripture a test of fellowship. But let me ask you: what purpose does it serve other than making some people feel superior and others feel inferior—second-class citizens because, for whatever reason, they are unable to suspend their disbelief? I don’t mean that they are *unwilling* to believe, I mean that they are *unable*! Suppose in church we asked all the people who could lift a hundred pounds over their head to sit on one side of the sanctuary and all those who couldn’t to sit on the other. What would it prove except that some people are physically stronger than others? Why do we try to separate ourselves on the basis of whose faith is the strongest? And for that matter is an ability to believe the unbelievable the same thing as faith? I know people who believe that Elvis is still alive. Does that mean their faith is strong? Or does it only mean that some people will believe anything?

Rather than arguing about who believes the Bible more let me suggest another approach. In seminary I learned that the Bible is “the Word of God for the people of God,” and that it is authoritative in all matters of faith and practice. To put it simply, the Bible tells us what to believe and how to behave. But before that the Bible is simply the Word of God. It is how God talks to us. Therefore the appropriate question to ask when looking at a passage like this is not, “Did it really happen this way?” but, “What on earth is God trying to say?” In fact, write that down on a slip of paper and use it as a bookmark in your Bible: NOT, “Did it really happen this way?” BUT, “What on earth is God trying to say?” What does it mean to say something like Jesus walked on water, and in this story what does it mean to say that Peter did, too?

Let’s take a closer look:

When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded he got in a boat with his disciples and went to a “solitary place.” He wanted to be alone. But the crowds heard about it and walked around the shore until they came to where he was and when he saw them, he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. Later, when it was getting late and they were hungry, he fed the whole crowd with five loaves and two fish, and again I think it was because he felt pity for them. So the picture of Jesus that Matthew paints for us here is a picture of someone who is full of compassion, who sees human need and responds to it. Why did Jesus walk on water? Not to show off. Not to prove that it could be done. He did it because his disciples were in trouble. There they were, out on the Sea of Galilee in the darkest hour of the night, rowing hard for shore but buffeted (the Greek word can also mean “tortured” or “tormented”) by the wind and the waves. Jesus felt for them and came to them, and because he didn’t have a boat he walked.

Surely Matthew is trying to tell us something here: not only that Jesus is full of compassion but that he is full of God's compassion, because who else can walk on water? The book of Job says that God alone "stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea" (9:8). Psalm 77 says God's way was "through the sea," and his path "through the mighty waters," yet his footprints were unseen (vs. 19). The one who made the sea, who bound the molecules so tightly together that a bug could walk on water, could easily bind them together more tightly still, until they could support the weight of a man. Or maybe Matthew is trying to tell us that it wasn't a man. Some scholars think that he is trying to present Jesus not just as a great prophet, but as God himself—"God-with-us," as the name Immanuel suggests—and that his appearance to his disciples in that troubled hour was a theophany: a "God-sighting."

But that's not what the disciples thought. When they saw that mysterious figure walking on the water, lit up only by occasional flashes of lightning, they thought they were seeing a ghost. Matthew says they were terrified, crying out in fear, so that Jesus must have had to shout above the noise of their cries and over the roar of the wind, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Again it is the scholars who point out that when you translate the words "It is I" into Greek you get *ego eimi* but when you translate them into Hebrew you get *Yahweh*—the name of God. The disciples are screaming that it's a ghost and so Jesus identifies himself: "*It is I; ego eimi; Yahweh.*" If that's a legitimate interpretation you could explain that Jesus walks on water because he is no ordinary man, he is the divine man—God incarnate—who comes to his disciples in their darkest hour.

It would explain Jesus, but it wouldn't explain Peter, who is a very ordinary man. When he sees that it's Jesus he says, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the

water.” Jesus says come, Peter steps out of the boat, and for a few moments at least he is walking on water. If God alone has that ability then it must have been some of God’s power, temporarily granted to Peter, that enabled him to do the same. But if God can bestow his power on Peter he can bestow it on Jesus, too, and suddenly we don’t have to assume that Jesus is the Divine Man, but only a man on whom God’s divinity rests. He is God’s chosen, God’s favorite, God’s Messiah, God’s son. He comes striding across the waves like a water bug, light as a feather, bright as a bubble, and Peter, who always seems to be jumping out of boats, wants to try it for himself. “Tell me to come to you on the water!” he shouts, and for whatever reason Jesus tells him to come.

What happens next is what you see in the cartoons from time to time, where the coyote runs off the edge of a cliff and keeps running for a few steps, until he sees where he is, looks down, gulps, and then drops like a rock. What makes that funny is the “plausible impossibility” of it. It looks *plausible*—that is, it looks like something that could actually happen—but it’s not *possible*. As most of you will remember from elementary school gravity is not just a good idea, it’s the law. Somewhere, a few steps away from the boat, Peter sees where he is: standing on top of the water in a storm-tossed sea with the wind howling around his ears, and in that moment he takes his eyes off Jesus, looks down, gulps, and begins to sink like a stone. But God bless him for what he does next, because even in that surreal situation he remembers what to do when he’s in trouble: he says, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus reaches out his hand, catches him, and pulls him back up to the surface. “Oh, you of little faith,” he says. “Why did you doubt?”

Sometimes people use this passage as a proof-text for faith. They say, “You see? If you have enough faith you can walk on water!” Isn’t it interesting that in all the years since this event took place there have been no reports of anyone else walking on water? There have been plenty of people of faith, and some of them had more faith than Peter, I’m sure, but as far as I know there have been no reports that St. Augustine, or Francis of Assisi, or Mother Teresa ever stepped out on the water. Maybe that’s because Jesus isn’t chiding Peter for his inability to believe that he can walk on water, but for his inability to believe in God. It is God, after all, who made the winds and the waves and the water. He has complete control over them. And if he wants to make the sea solid enough to stand on, he can. Jesus, full of that kind of faith, helps Peter back into the boat, climbs in with him, and when he does the wind ceases, the waves subside, and the disciples find themselves on a calm, flat sea. There is a long pause in that sudden silence, and then one of them says, “Truly you are the Son of God!” And then they all join in, worshipping Jesus.

You may find that you still have trouble believing this story, that no amount of explanation can convince you a man walked on water. Maybe not. But I hope you can believe that you still have a place in the church. Even as Jesus chided Peter for his lack of faith he helped him into the boat. And maybe you can believe this: that *something* happened out there that night. In the space of a few minutes a boatload of disciples went from screaming, “It’s a ghost!” to worshipping Jesus and saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God.” In other words they moved from fear...to faith. That’s amazing, isn’t it? More amazing than walking on water. And if the same thing could happen for us today, if we

could move from fear to faith and come to the end of this story worshiping Jesus, it would be more amazing still.

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