

Sermon for Sunday, August 13, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It had been a long night.
A long night
after a long day.
It had begun with terrible news.
John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin,
was dead,
killed at the whim
of the ruler's stepdaughter,
his head served up on a plate
for the entertainment
at his birthday feast.
John's followers
had taken his body
and buried it,
and then begun the long journey north
to tell his family.

And arrived early one morning
tired and dusty from the road,
rushing to tell Jesus,
who heard the news with sadness,
and got in a boat
and headed
to a quiet place
to pray
and to grieve.

Except it didn't work,
Because when he arrived
he discover the crowds had got there first.
crowding the shoreline,
not so much standing
as limping and being carried,
people desperate to be healed,
desperate
for hope.

And he sighed, and got out of his boat,
and began to heal them, and on, and on,
until the air began to cool,
and the sun drop,
and his disciples, who by this time had caught up with him,
came to him and said, "It's getting late; it's time for dinner. Send them all away;
they need to go back to their villages."

"You feed them," said Jesus.

"What?"

And they looked at one another,
and they all know what each other was thinking.

"He's crazy."

"No, you feed them. Gather what you have, and I'll bless it, and then pass it out."

Five loaves and two fish later,
and the crowds were fed,
and there were twelve baskets of food left over,
and only then
was Jesus ready
to send the people home.

And he began
with the disciples.

"Get back in your boat,
and go home. I'll get rid of the crowds,
have a little time alone,
then catch you later."

And they left,
and the crowds after them,
and Jesus headed up the hillside to pray.

Meanwhile, the disciples
were still out on the boat.
I'm not sure why:
the Sea of Galilee
is only about eight miles wide and thirteen long,
and at least four of the twelve
were experienced fishermen.
You can normally see
from one side of the sea to the other;
it should only have taken them

a couple of hours to get home;
perhaps they decided
they'd do a little fishing,
just so they'd be ready
the next time Jesus decided to offer
thousands of people
a meal.

Anyway, whatever the reason,
they were still out there late in the night.
The moon had come out,
then been shrouded by clouds,
then the wind whipped around the notch in the hills to the west
and blew up a gale,
and it was all they could do
to keep the boat afloat,
pulling the sails in
so they wouldn't be ripped to shreds,
shipping the oars
because rowing seemed to make no difference,
and baling water
as fast as they could.

Hours later
they were still there,
still struggling,
and no land in sight.
And the steep hills of the Golan Heights
blocked the rising sun to the east
so that the only sign that the long night was drawing to an end
was a slight change in the texture of the air,
more grey than black.
And then they saw something on the horizon.
A shadow, almost,
just the suggestion of something
neither water nor air,
and as the sky slowly lightened
the shadow darkened,
and it became a figure.
And still no sign

of the shore.
Just clouds and thunder and lightning and water,
and the shape
of a person.
And they were terrified.
And as the figure approached
they began to shout out
for it to go away,
to leave them alone!

And then the figure spoke.
“It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”
And Peter, Peter heard something in the voice
that he recognized.
“Lord? Lord? If it’s you,
prove it. Let me come to you!”

“Come,” said Jesus.
So Peter came.
He dropped his baling bucket,
balanced for a moment on the side of the boat,
and then dropped into the water.

But didn’t sink.
Instead, he found himself
standing, walking,
as if the water itself
had somehow taken on substance.
And there was Jesus, right ahead.
“Come.”

But then he began to look around.
And heard the shouts of his friends,
calling him to reach out for the rope they had thrown him,
and noticed the wind
whipping the waves into foam,
and he got scared.

And he went to step forward toward Jesus,
and there was nothing under his feet.

“I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die.”

“Help me Lord, I’m sinking!”

And Jesus reached out his hand,
and caught him.

And nothing after that
really mattered.

Yes, they made it back to the boat safely.
Yes, the other disciples the wind dropped.
Yes, the storm stopped,
and the sun rose bright in a clear blue sky,
and they reached the shore
where the same people were waiting
as had been there the day before,
limping and being carried,
desperate to be healed,
desperate
for hope.

It was almost as if
nothing
had changed.

Except for Peter.

It’s easy for us to look back
and condemn him
for his lack of faith.
After all, he’s the one
who suddenly got afraid,
who suddenly
began to sink,
who suddenly
had to be rescued
by Jesus.

Except that he’s also the only one

the only one of the twelve
who leapt out of the boat.
All the others
stayed in relative safety.
They had wood under their feet
and a proven means
of surviving the storm.
But Peter,
Peter saw Jesus
and could think of nothing else
than going to meet him.
Even at the risk
of his own life.

At the end of the story,
when everyone was back in the boat,
the storm had died down,
and they were heading back to land,
the disciples started worshipping Jesus and saying,
“Truly you are the Son of God”
But it’s not clear
exactly why they said it.
Is it because the storm has stopped?
Is it because he walked on water?
Is it because he rescued Peter?
We don’t know.

You see, this is a different story
than the ones told in the other gospels.
The story they tell
is of Jesus being asleep in the boat,
and waking up
and calming the sea.
They focus
on Jesus’ power
over the wind and the waves,
Jesus the incarnation of the creator,
whose spirit hovered over the face of the deep
and brought all things into being out of chaos.
And they focus

on Jesus
as the great rescuer,
getting the disciples
to safety
when they think they are about to drown.

And in the church,
we often use those stories to remind us
that Jesus will come to us when we are most struggling, Jesus will comfort us
when things are difficult.
And I have to admit
that even the hymns I've chosen for today
seem to echo that idea.

Those things are true,
absolutely, they are true,
but I'm not sure
that that's
what this story is about.
Because this is Matthew's second story
about a storm on the lake.
The first one
is just like the ones that Mark and Luke tell,
Jesus asleep in the boat,
and waking up
and calming the storm,
and rescuing them all.

But this one,
this one
is different.
Jesus appears.
No one's quite sure who it is,
but Peter
thinks it just might be Jesus,
and takes a chance
and leaps out of that boat to go to him.
And he's right.
He's absolutely right.
It is Jesus.

And it makes me wonder.
Has there ever been a time
when you thought you just might have heard Christ calling to you?

Where you've seen something or someone
and you thought that may, just maybe, it was Jesus?

Remember the story of the young boy Samuel?
He heard a voice calling for him in the night, and thought it was his master, Eli.
But the third time he'd been woken up, Eli said,
"Samuel, it's not me who is calling you. I think it might be God.
Tell him you're listening."

Have you ever heard something
that you wondered
is this God speaking?

How have you responded?

We're so often taught
to be careful, sensible, responsible.
Taking risks
is something that's frowned on.
And it's even more so in the church.
We often see our church community
as a place where our history and traditions and memories
hold us safe and secure.
But what if it's actually the opposite?
What if Peter had just kept his head down,
frantically baling like all the others,
and Jesus had just
passed them by?

Of course, we'll never know,
But it makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Because what this story seems to say is,
if you think you see or hear Jesus,
do something about it.

Take a risk.
Respond to him.
Ask him
what he wants you to do.

At the core of Jesus' call to us
is to follow him.
To live our lives differently
because of him.
To tell other people about him.

Yes, it might be scary.
It might mean stepping out of your safe zone.
It might mean being uncomfortable,
or giving up something,
or maybe even being laughed at.

If Peter was willing to risk his life,
and Jesus gave his for our sake,
are we willing to take risks
for Jesus?