



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Signifying Everything”

Matthew 14:22-33

Jen Brothers

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This story. It’s wild, isn’t it? Full of sound and fury, and signifying everything I have felt in the past few months. Jesus’ disciples are overwhelmed by the winds and waves set against them. They are not in control. They have left the shore they knew so well, not because they decided to, but because Jesus *compelled* them to—and they have not yet reached the other side. They are stuck in the middle of a lake. The forces of nature have interrupted their journey by creating a destabilizing chaos of sound and fury. They are being battered about far from a shore they can no



longer see. And Jesus, where is he? He's not in the boat with them—not yet—no, he's somewhere out there in all the chaos.

This reading strikes close to home this year. I can relate to the disciples' fear. I understand why they think they see a ghost on that water. The sound and the fury of this story signifies everything I have felt since a microscopic virus showed us just how vulnerable we are to the forces of nature. The sound and the fury signify everything I have felt since George Floyd's death revealed how far we are from the shores of equality. I imagine the sound and the fury of it signify so much of what you have experienced lately. And yet, here is the good news: this story signifies everything we need to know in this moment. Jesus is in the chaos, Jesus has power over the chaos, and Jesus will deliver us from sinking into the chaos.

This story, so full of sound and fury, is more than a quaint little tale about a miracle. It's a carefully crafted, highly sophisticated, frame-breaking narrative about what it means to live in this world as a follower of Christ. Every word in it counts—every image could be a sermon in itself. It's a story about us. It's about the world we live in and the forces that threaten our safety. And it's about Jesus—who he is and how he saves and empowers his followers. Like any passage in the Bible, a quick surface read will not do if transformation is what we seek. We must dive deep into the text, layer by layer, to find a word of hope, a source of strength, perhaps even an encounter with the living Christ.

On the surface, this is a story about the first time the disciples head out to sea without Jesus. His command to go on ahead of him to the other side comes on the heel of the miraculous feeding of thousands of people with a little bit of bread and fish. But now Jesus wants to be alone. Surely, he will join them soon—he said he would. Then night falls, and they are far from either shore, and the wind begins to batter the boat. The waves toss them around. They lose all sense of control. They search for Jesus, but they don't know where he is.

Let's sink a bit deeper into this story. There is a reference at the beginning that is easily lost on a modern audience. Even before the wind and the waves threatened to overwhelm the disciples' boat, the early Biblical audience would have felt anxiety at Jesus' command to set out in the boat without him. Wind or no wind, the sea represented chaos, it represented destruction, and it represented death. Early listeners knew that in the act of creation God had held back the chaos of the waters by creating dry land. But they also knew that this same chaos was always threatening the goodness of the created order. To head out into those waters without Jesus would have set off warning bells for early listeners, just like attempting to get to the other side of 2020 without Christ should set off warning bells for us—because as this story reveals, Jesus has power over the chaos, the destruction, and the death that we fear. When Jesus walked toward the disciples on the water, this act was more than a cool magic trick—it was a revelation signifying everything we need to understand about resurrection faith: Jesus steps into the chaos, Jesus has power over the chaos, and Jesus will save us from sinking into the chaos. Let's not miss this point: Jesus' walk on the water foreshadowed the journey Jesus would later take when he walked through the chaos of sin and death to bring us with him into the new creation.



So now, at this deeper level, we can see this story is also about Christ's church. Just like the disciples then, we who follow Christ are under this same command today—to go out ahead of him to the other side, often on an unpredictable sea. We are a peculiar people called out by God to walk, like Jesus, into the chaos of this world and go where God commands so the borders of God's kingdom grow. Matthew's gospel won't let us shy away from what God asks of us. The disciples are on a dangerous sea, their boat is straining against the wind and waves just like the Christian church strains to be faithful in difficult times. Yes, in the past, we have felt Jesus' presence in calm times and in miraculous times. But right now, in this particular 2020 moment, the Christian church is on an unsteady sea, straining to follow Christ's command faithfully, to walk in this present chaos while waiting for Jesus to show up, and unsure of what that will look like. While we wait, we remember this story.

Picture the scene. After a frightful night, in the sound and fury of crashing waves and roaring wind, a shadowy figure walks toward the disciples. *It is a ghost!* they cry out. They are so undone they cannot recognize the very one they need. But when Jesus utters the words, *Take courage! It is I! Do not be afraid*, Peter perks up. Now, maybe he recognized Jesus' voice, but there's also a deeper recognition here. With the words *It is I*, Jesus invokes the I AM that God spoke to Moses when Moses asked for God's name. It's the Name signifying everything. I AM. I AM the first. I AM the last. I AM the resurrection. I AM the life. I AM the way. I AM the truth. I AM with you. *It is I. Do not be afraid. Do not flee from me.*

Some suggest Peter doubts Jesus when he says, *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the waters*. I think he recognizes this most holy of names and realizes he can't get to Jesus on his own. Because he is afraid, he needs Jesus to call him first. He needs Jesus to compel him out onto that water so that he can learn who Jesus really is. *Make me come to you*, he is saying. *I can't get to you on my own*. Peter's request strikes me as a prayer signifying everything about how to approach God in a crisis. *I don't want to be here in this boat. I don't want this challenge. I'm afraid. I want to be with you, Jesus, but I don't know how to get to you. Use your power to bring me to you.*

Matthew tells us that Jesus honors this prayer with one word: "Come." *Leave the place where you are, and walk toward me*. This journey is physical and it's metaphorical. It's the journey we all must take if we want the peace that only Christ can offer. As Peter takes his first steps, his eyes are squarely on Jesus. But at some point, the wind catches his attention again. It's been blowing all along, but now he's back to seeing it. It's a strong wind. It's a combative wind. It's charging right at him. His fear returns, and he begins to sink down, down, down.

You know this sinking feeling. I know this sinking feeling. We have experienced so much sinking lately. The sinking of dreams. The sinking of milestones and celebrations. The sinking of hope. Like Peter, as the winds of a global pandemic continue to charge against us, we know what it's like to feel the water around our ankles, our knees, our bellies, even our necks. There is one thing for a peculiar people to do when we are sinking. Peter gives us those words: *Lord, save me!*



And here is the good news, once more. Not only can Jesus save us, Jesus is ready to do just that. Just as Jesus was quick to pull Peter out of the water, the resurrected Christ is ready to rescue you and me from drowning in a sea of all that we cannot control. This image is both immediate and eternal. Jesus, Emanuel, the God who is with us, will save us from drowning.

A friend testified to how this truth recently played out in her life. She was so overwhelmed by what was being asked of her that she cried out, “God, I can’t do it. I don’t have the energy.” It was a confession. It was a prayer. In that moment she sensed God saying to her, “I will give you all you need to do my work,” and she says she immediately found the energy she needed, along with some great assistants who came alongside in support. She says God gave her *everything* she needed, not just the physical energy she was looking for. This is what stepping out onto the water with Christ looks like. Instead of running away from God because she feared her inadequacy, she faced God and acknowledged that what was being asked of her felt like too much.

This pandemic is forcing many of us into a space of feeling inadequate, ill-equipped, ill-prepared on a daily—perhaps even hourly—basis. How do we keep people employed? How do we educate children? How do we create an economy where everyone can thrive? Christ is in these moments with us, ready to save us from sinking.

There is also a deeper level of saving that this story points us toward, reflected in the word Peter uses when he cries out for help: *Sozon*. While its meaning is to deliver from danger into safety, this word primarily references God’s deliverance from the penalty and the power of sin. *Sozon* signifies what God has done through the cross and resurrection, and what God continues to do for us. God has never asked us to save ourselves.

Our faith will falter. Our eyes will lose sight of Christ, even when we step out of the boat and into the storm to get closer to Jesus. But the good news is God is ready to rescue us. Our God steps down into the chaos. Our God has power over the chaos. Our God will deliver us from sinking into the chaos. Our job is to step out into the chaos with eyes fixed on Christ—not the wind and the waves that batter us around. This doesn’t mean we ignore the reality of what is happening all around us, it just means we don’t let what we see cause us to lose faith in the One who met death with resurrection, the One who is even now bringing about a new creation, the one who says, *take courage, it is I, and I AM WITH YOU*.

We will stumble. Our faith will waiver. There will be times when the sound and the fury of it all causes us to sink. There is only one thing for a peculiar people called out by God to do—follow Peter’s lead and cry out, *Lord, save me!* The One whose power over death signifies everything will bring us to the other side. Because this is who God is. This is what God does.

