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August 7, 2011

Matthew 14:22-33

Caught!

I hope I am not the only one in the room who grew up watching cartoons or this is going to be a little embarrassing!

I watched all the Warner Brother and Disney cartoons---Mickey and Donald, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, Wile E. Coyote and the roadrunner---

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These cartoons had a lot in common---mainly what is called

Suspension of belief.

In other words, if you are going to enjoy the cartoon, you have to stop thinking about whether or not it's realistic, whether or not certain things could actually happen, and you just have to accept that it's the way the cartoon world works.

The laws of physics don't apply in cartoons. If they did, they wouldn't be anywhere near as entertaining.

And so you see characters getting super-strength from eating spinach, being seriously injured and then two seconds later they're fine---not even dirty or scratched. You see animals talking and walking on two feet and wearing clothes, and mice that are as big as big dogs.

You see, over and over again, characters running off a cliff and then continuing to run in mid-air, chasing after whatever or whoever they want to catch up with. They keep going until they look down and see that there is nothing solid under their feet.

There is a long pause, and then they fall, yelling all the way down.

The laws of physics don't apply as long as they're paying attention only to their goal---catching the other character. Gravity only kicks in when they think about where they are, when they look down---hanging in mid-air with nothing to catch them! So they fall.

Most of us are familiar with the passage from the Gospel according to Matthew that I read a moment ago. Many of us know how Jesus came walking on the water to the boat that was far away from the shore,

and how the disciples thought Jesus must be a ghost, because people made of flesh and blood can't walk on top of water.

We know that today, too, and we can even explain it in scientific language---that a human body is denser than water, and things that have a higher density than water will sink.

When we read this passage, we just might have to suspend belief, just like we do for cartoons, but instead of suspending it to enjoy the show, we suspend it so that we can actually hear the Word of God in it.

Peter knew that people can't walk on water. Years of experience as a fisherman taught him that. He knew that it was impossible for anyone to walk on water, and yet he got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus! Scripture doesn't tell us how far he got before he got scared and took his eyes off of Jesus.

When he got scared, he started to sink, but he still had enough faith that instead of just flailing around, he called out, "Lord, save me!"

He didn't have enough faith to continue walking on water, but he DID have enough faith to trust that Jesus could save him!

He let Jesus take his hand, let him pull him back up on top of the water, and then walked with Jesus back to the boat.

He had started to walk toward Jesus, keeping his eyes and his thoughts on Jesus. He started to sink when he let fear take over inside of him. He rose up to the top again when he admitted that he needed Jesus to save him and accepted that help.

I think the analogies are clear----we can only walk on water --- do something impossible--- experience a miracle--- when we keep our eyes on Jesus. Fear keeps us weighed down and we just might even drown in it unless we admit that we need Jesus, that without him we can do nothing!

But there is one thing that needs to be emphasized---- and that's this-

That even when we're afraid, even when we're in big trouble and sinking deep in fear and sin, Jesus Christ stands by, ready to help! Ready to take our hand!

All of this was good news to the Christians of the second half of the first century, when the Gospel according to Matthew was first written down.

Persecution was hard and heavy during that time, and it came not only from the Roman Government but also from the Jewish religious authorities, who were trying to stop this new movement from growing bigger and stronger.

Oppressed by the Romans and despised by their own people, perhaps even by their own families, Christians must have often felt alone and afraid and in danger of drowning in the challenges they faced.

They were in very real danger of facing the choice of denying Christ or dying in the Coliseum or by stoning by religious leaders. But even if their lives were not being threatened, they were often making huge personal sacrifices with the loss of family and friends.

Knowing that even the great Apostle Peter had been scared, knowing that he had cried out to Jesus and that Jesus had saved him must have given them encouragement and peace.

It must have helped them stand firm as they faced hard choices and even as death claimed them.

These days we are not persecuted, at least not in this country, for being Christian. Our lives are not in danger. But we do get scared of other things happening ---scared of being injured or killed in an accident. Scared of being assaulted. Scared of losing our homes or our jobs.

Scared of getting sick or incapacitated. Scared that someone we love will not love us, or will stop loving us. Scared of dying alone and unloved.

Scared of other things---war and terrorism and earthquakes and fires.

When we're scared, it may seem like we're alone, that not even Jesus Christ is anywhere around.

When we feel that way, we need to remember that the disciples were out in the Sea of Galilee, far from shore in a storm. And Jesus came to them, in a way that seems completely impossible! He came walking on the water!

He reached out to Peter when Peter cried out for help when he was very afraid. He saved Peter. Then they both got into the boat, and the wind stopped. There was no longer any threat. Nothing could hurt them when Jesus was there with them. The disciples were no longer afraid. They were convinced that Jesus is the son of God, and they worshipped him.

So the Good News for the persecuted Christians 2000 years ago is still Good News for us today, even though the reasons to be afraid might be different. The Good News is still, "Christ is with us through all of our fears."

But I want to back up a minute.

Peter was the only disciple who got out of the boat. Peter, the Rock. Christ told him that the Church would be built on him, so we know there is something special about him, something that maybe we should try to be like.

So let's look again at the passage.

The disciples were all afraid that they were seeing a ghost coming toward them, walking on the water. That was the same for all of them----the fear. But Peter threw out sort of a challenge----“Lord, if it’s you, command me to come to you walking on the water.”

“If it’s you—“ He wasn’t sure. His powers of discernment were not sharp enough to know for sure. His faith was not strong enough to just believe it was Jesus.

His reason and experience were stronger than his faith that Jesus would and could come to them walking on the water. There was no precedent for any of this.

So he questioned. He wanted some kind of proof.

And Christ said, “Well, come on then!” And either Peter recognized Jesus’ voice, or just because that was the deal and he couldn’t back out--- he got out of the boat.

Well, now, I don’t know about you, but I would rather lose a little face than step out of a boat in the middle of a lake, especially if the weather was bad!

But Peter got out! Why?? Was he temporarily insane? Was he suicidal? I don't think so.

I think he saw Jesus, his Savior and friend, and he wanted to go to him. He wanted to be with him.

I think what got him out of the boat was passion----passion for Jesus, passion for who Jesus is and for all he had done. Passion for what he might have started to see as his own future, if only he could meet the challenge.

And as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, as long as Jesus' face was his only focus, he could do the impossible. He could be the channel of a miraculous event. He could walk on water!

But once his all-too-human fear took hold, he was distracted from his passion, from his all-consuming desire to be with Jesus, and his human side overtook his brush with divinity, and he sank.

His connection with a miracle needed a little more help, help that could only come from Jesus.

Madeleine L'Engle, best known for her book "A Wrinkle in Time", wrote a number of other books, including one entitled, "Walking on Water." In it, she reflects on the ability to walk on water as something that we have lost, that we've forgotten how to do.

Maybe she's right, or maybe walking on water is something we need to learn how to do from Jesus Christ. Maybe knowing Jesus, focusing on him, is how we remember, or maybe it's how we learn how in the first place.

It doesn't matter, really. I don't even know if walking on water is actually the goal.

The goal is always more about the relationship with Christ than it is about any action, any miracle.

The ultimate goal is always a relationship so deep that it can allow us to forget to think in terms of possible and impossible. A relationship so all-consuming that we are no longer afraid to leave the familiar and step out of our comfort zones.

A relationship so filled with passion that our eyes never leave Jesus' face, that our hearts are so filled with love that there is no room for fear.

