

## Going Forth in Faith

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

A sermon delivered 10 August 2008 at  
Arlington Heights United Church of Christ  
Arlington Heights, IL

Mike Underhill

Thank you and theme  
(Following the church's tradition,  
this is part of the opening of worship.)

Thank you, Connie, for that introduction. It's indeed a pleasure to be with you this morning. It turns out this has been our weekend to be in Arlington Heights. Yesterday Vince and I – along with our daughter Nadia and our dog Xena -- scoured Arlington Heights from one end to another, seeking out garage sales. And then today, we're back in Arlington Heights for church.

- What about opposition and doubt?
- What resources do we have? Are they enough?

Thank you very much for the opportunity to preach and be with you in worship today.

Our gospel story today is probably familiar to many of you. It's the story of a stormy night on the Sea of Galilee. In particular, it's the story of Jesus' and Peter's walking on water.

Interpretations of this story often focus on a psycho-drama of Peter. The moral that's often drawn is that if Peter had enough faith, he could have walked on water. And the message to us is then said to be, "If we have enough faith, we can overcome all our problems in spectacular ways."

This morning I suggest that we look at the story with fresh eyes. Partially, it's a continuation of last week's story of Jesus feeding the multitude. Partially, it's a resurrection story. As a whole, it's a realistic training manual for our going forth in faith – going forth collectively as a congregation.

- What are we called to do?

## Sermon

### 1. Prayer.

### 2. Situate Matthew 14:22-33

Before reading today's gospel story, it will be helpful to situate it in Matthew's gospel.

- Long section of intellectual teaching about the Realm of God – wonderful parables that Jesus uses to get us thinking in new ways.
- Then at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, the action resumes. And it's BAD news.
  - Rejection at home
  - Execution of John the Baptist.
- Then, as Pastor Rex discussed last Sunday, we have the incredible story about Jesus, the disciples, and the multitudes. There is really GOOD news.
  - Thousands and thousands of folk track Jesus down.
  - They are healed.
  - Community is formed.
  - They are fed.
- It appears as though the bad news is past; there's now the good news of power and popular success.

### 3. Read Matthew 14:22-33

### 4. Commentary on scripture

This story makes concrete what it's like for a congregation to go forth in faith, to be disciples of Jesus. Here are the three headlines:

- What are we to do? Go forth in the mission of Christ.
- Opposition? Yes – external and internal
- Resources? Enough for the tasks at hand.

Now let's look at Matthew's story a little more closely.

1. Jesus "made" the disciples go out—compelled them
2. The sea crossing concerns the launching of Jesus' mission into gentile territory. The disciples are to go forth and continue his mission on the other side. In this sea crossing, they are on their own for the first time in Matthew's gospel.
3. They immediately run into trouble. In the Biblical mind the sea connotes the forces of chaos, always threatening. Moreover, the winds are against them. In the chaos of the world the disciples are left alone in the boat with only their fragile craft preserving them.
4. They are terrified, perplexed, and fearful. It is all confusing. Remember: we are talking about a core of people trained in the ways of sailing on the Sea. And even they do not get it! What on earth could be going on?
5. Then there's an apparition, a phantom, a ghost. It seems to walk on the water – something only God can do – and it speaks in language reminiscent of God's self-identification to Moses at the burning bush: "I am." And the voice comforts them, "Take heart, have courage, do not be afraid."
6. One disciple, perhaps their leader,

decides to test the situation, to get clarity: “Lord, IF it is you...” It’s a perfectly reasonable response. We expect it, do we not, of our church leaders and pastors – try to make sense of a terrifying and confusing situation.

7. Jesus agrees to the test. Peter leaves the community, stepping out on his own. And he is successful, for a moment. But then something happens and he begins to sink. Peter calls Jesus. Jesus takes him back to the boat.
8. Jesus words to Peter may be understood as a stern rebuke about the consequences of insufficient faith or as a word of encouragement.
  - a. “Little faith” is used five times in Matthew’s gospel. Some scholars consider it to be Jesus’ pet name for the disciples.
  - b. In the NT there are 4 Greek words that are all translated as “doubt.” Matthew uses here a rare word, found only here and in Matthew’s account of the Great Commission at the end of the gospel. Here “doubt” means waiver, think twice, stand in two ways, to not feel confident about something. For example, “I doubt whether I can get it finished on time.”
  - c. Message translation: “Faint-heart, what got into to you?”
9. In the midst of the storm, the disciples discover Christ’s presence. As Pastor Rex preached last week, when we

bring whatever we have to Christ, we discover God’s abundance. We discover that with Christ present we have “enough” for the tasks at hand.

10. By the way, note that the fear of the disciples, the supposition that Jesus is a ghost, and Jesus’ words of assurance all belong to the form of a resurrection appearance story. If it’s a resurrection story, then it is not simply a story about back then. It’s a story about here and now and what is available to us today.

## 5. Relevance to us today

Today we have heard a story about going forth in faith. What about us now, two thousand years later?

- Some of our churches are still in the harbor.
- Many of our churches are at sea, in the midst of heavy storms.
- Opposition is strong!
  - Political opposition
  - Religious opposition
- **Act out, dramatize opposition to the UCC**

## 6. Closing

Whatever else it is, the resurrection of Christ is “God’s way of validating what Jesus incarnated and embodied in his life, including his practice of justice.”<sup>1</sup> Our pursuit of justice therefore stems from a commitment to align ourselves with the will of God shown in the resurrection

<sup>1</sup> William R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 251.

Because of Christ's resurrection, just as the disciples 2,000 thousand years ago, we today are "compelled" to go forth in Christ's mission to the world.

What might our mission be today? In its *Statement of Mission* affirmed by General Synod 16 in 1987, the UCC claimed (among others) the following points of its call to participate in God's mission:

- To hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace
- To name and confront the powers of evil with and among us
- To repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death
- To join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation
- To work for justice, healing, and wholeness of life.

If we go forth on this mission, there WILL be opposition. The opposition will be serious and will be on all fronts. Being a small ship in the midst of a catastrophic storm is no metaphor; it is a reality for many UCC churches and for our denomination as a whole.

Yet, just as did the disciples 2,000 years ago, we today will discover that we have enough for the tasks at hand.

- We have the boat – our congregations.
- We have each other.
  - Our "little faith" is enough.
  - Together, we are the

body of Christ.

- In the midst of midst of the opposition from without and within, we discover the risen Christ with us.
  - When we bring to Christ whatever we have, all that we are, we will have enough for the tasks at hand.

Sisters and brother, you of great faith and you of little-faith, hear again the words of Christ:

Take heart [have courage] ... it is I ...don't be afraid!

You of little faith, ... why do you vacillate?