
We Risk, We Doubt, We Sink, We Rise.

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14, Year A
Homecoming Sunday

“Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

About 7 or 8 years ago, it was my turn to tend to the young children. We were on a lake, and, of course, the danger of water tragedy is always present on a lake. The children all wear life jackets on the dock until they have passed the traditional “Swim Test.”

But, children run and explore. They pick up things. They peer over the side of the dock into the water. They wander and waver, and jump and run. And the noble tenders-of-children are forever chasing and warning and guiding and watching.

On the morning of my duty as the tender-of-children, I do not know how it happened. But, somehow, the child under my guard went off the dock, and into the water. It was not disastrous. I was immediately there, lifting him out of the water. At about three years old, he could actually swim a bit; but, of course, the tumble surprised him. He had no idea he could fall into the water like that. We were both shocked! Thankfully, we were soon over the shock.

“Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt? Why did you waver?”

When Jesus caught Peter from the water, Jesus asked, “Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?” But I am not sure he was asking only Peter. He asks each of us the same thing, “Why did you doubt?” I think he has been asking that question for all of eternity, “Why do you waver?” Maybe he even asked the question of himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, or even on the cross, “Why do you doubt?”

The word “doubt,” can also mean “waver.” Why do we all waver? Maybe it is part of our nature. We waver because we wander. And wandering is not a bad thing. Wavering is not always a bad thing, either, if it causes us to pause, if it causes us to consider, to consider various possibilities.

I wonder how Jesus would have answered his own question. Why did Peter doubt? Why do any of us doubt? Why does Jesus himself sometimes waver in his ministry?

Peter, good old Saint Peter, is the primary apostle of Jesus. It is Peter who always seems to be there with Jesus, in good times and bad. It is Peter who is always speaking up, taking the lead in matters of faith, but also taking the lead in matters of unfaith. Thus, Peter represents all of humanity. Peter might be considered the patron saint of all of us, representing humanity at our best but also at our worst. Peter can say to Jesus, “You are the Christ!” and he can also deny even knowing Jesus.

And, yet, Jesus will call Simon Peter “the rock.” Jesus says, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build the church.” But Peter sure is an unsteady rock, just like all of us can be unsteady. Peter, in that way, really does represent the Church, eager but also unsteady. Sometimes we can walk on water; and sometimes we are sinking in the water.

Yes, we call Simon Peter “the rock.” But he sure can be erratic and unreliable. I joke that the only time Peter really acted like a rock, was when he began to sink in the water! He is one of us when he sinks into the water.

We are Peter when we stride out confidently into the day, but then begin to notice our own worries and anxieties. We begin to sink beneath those concerns and threats. We go down into the mire. We notice the wind, the waves, and suddenly they become just too much. How can we go on into this new year, this new job, this new relationship, this new challenge?

I was so confident just yesterday. I was so full of faith only a moment ago. Now, though, I need someone to take my hand. I need someone to lift me up. Who will lift me up? *"Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, Let me stand."*

Back in the boat, I begin to wonder. Back in the safety of being on the dock, I begin to wonder. Why did I doubt? Why did I waver? And the Lord, the One who takes my hand, wonders the same thing. Why did you doubt?

Maybe I was just being a wise explorer, a wise wanderer in this precious life. Maybe I was wisely exploring other roads, considering all my choices. A good traveller considers lots of possibilities. Or, maybe I was trying to help someone else, someone who was in the water.

Maybe I was just peering over the side of the dock, to see some bug or stick in the water. Maybe I just wanted to watch the way the waves lapped against the dock. Suddenly, I was in the water itself, sinking, and I needed foundation again. I needed a precious Lord, to lift me up.

Maybe I was wandering like the young boy, Joseph, one of the favorite sons of Jacob, the one with the technicolor dream coat, the coat of many colors. He was found, one day, simply wandering in the fields, having lost his brothers. Then, when he found his brothers, their jealousy caused them to leave him in a hole, in a pit, sunk beneath the ground.

Joseph had hands laid upon him, but they were the hands of betrayal. Joseph needed another kind of hand to lift him up. He needed someone else to lift him up out of the mire. And who lifted him up? The Midianites did. The foreigners did. He needed the hands of foreigners to lift him out of the pit; and he journeyed on with them.

Tradition (but not Scripture!) says that when Jesus stumbled and fell down, it was a man from Cyrene, down in Africa, who picked up his cross for him.

Then, of course, Jesus himself went really down. He succumbed to the depths. He sank into death. And it was Jesus, Jesus himself, who needed a power stronger than him, to lift him back up, to raise him from the dead.

Every one of us needs that lifter, because we all wander. We all doubt. Sometimes that doubt leads to sinking. And sometimes that wandering turns to wonder.

We all need that power who lifts us back up. And we want to be with that power! The entire reason Peter sank at all was because he wanted to be with Jesus. "If it is you," he had said, "command me to come out on the water."

Peter could have stayed in the boat. After all, it was stormy and dangerous outside; the wind was blowing. Inside the boat would have been a far better place to stay.

But Peter received the call to come out of the boat, to walk on the water with Jesus. And Peter did. Peter wanted to be where Jesus was.

And I do, too. I want to be where Jesus is. It is scary out there, out of the comfort of the boat, off the safety of the dock. But that is where Jesus is, amidst the very worries and anxieties of the world. Jesus is out there in the storms of life. Jesus is among the unfamiliar and the foreigners.

If we follow Jesus, we might sink. Indeed, we might go down as Jesus went down. We might suffer.

"O, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?" Well, I do not think anyone has the answer to that question. All of us have a little faith. And all of us doubt.

But the story is that someone is there for us. The power of God is there, the tender of our souls, the one who lifts us from the water, whether we sank because of our own wandering curiosity, or whether we sank out of doubt, or whether we sank simply because we were following Jesus to where the needs of the world are.

Jesus calls us to risky places, because that is where the action is. Jesus calls us to risky places, because he himself went down, came down, to earth, where the action is. Jesus calls us to risky places, because he also

provides the strength, to lift us back up when we sink. We risk. We doubt. We sink. We rise.

AMEN.

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