

## **Don't Look Down** *Matthew 14:22-33*

In February of this year, artist Qi Xianghua (Pronounced: Chi Shong-wah) painted this 3D landscape in front of a shopping mall in Guangzhou, China, the same city that the senior high youth group traveled two summers ago. For this particular piece of art, he earned the Guinness World Record for creating largest 3D painting in the world. I don't know if you can see him, but he's standing there on what looks like a ledge of a bridge. It took him about a month to paint this extraordinary scene and he now invites people to walk out onto it, stand on the ropes hanging over the illusory depths and smile for a picture. As you can see in the picture, the scene looks so real that it plays with your mind. Although they know it isn't real, many people have commented that they actually feel dizzy when they are standing on the edge. One woman claims that the only way she could muster up the courage to walk out there is if she didn't ever look down.

Fear of heights is a very real phobia for people. If you are afraid of heights or know someone who is, you know how crippling this reality can be. You will avoid heights at all costs. And if you ever find yourself at a time when you have to encounter your fear, you remember and repeat over and over to yourself that old mantra "Don't Look Down". It's not just a fear for fear sake, usually it's a doubt. It's doubt that the bridge was made securely enough to hold you in a rough wind. It's doubt on the edge of the grand canyon that the rock you're standing on is solid and the railing is securely planted into the ground. It's that when you look down and get that dizzy sinking feeling in your stomach, you doubt that your shaking legs are going to continue to hold you up. For people with a genuine fear of anything, repeating the phrase, "don't look down" can truly be a help.

In our Gospel today, Peter puts himself in a precarious situation by looking down. For those of you who aren't familiar with the story: after a series of miracles, including many healings and the feeding of over five thousand people from five fish and two loaves of bread, Jesus needs some time alone to pray and perhaps mourn the death of John the Baptist. He sends his disciples ahead of him on a boat headed to the other side of the sea of Galilee. In the middle of the night, a storm arises and the disciples notice a figure walking towards them on the surface of the water. Chalk it up to sailors superstition, but in their fear they immediately thought it was a ghost. I mean wouldn't you? The text tells us that they are even more afraid of Jesus than they were of the storm rocking their boat. It's definitely not something you see everyday. But as Jesus gets closer they realize that it is Him. And Peter being the often bold and rash person that he is does something unthinkable. He asks Jesus to let him walk on the water to meet Him. After all, he is Jesus' disciple, wanting to follow in his footsteps. And incredibly we read that he actually does it. We don't know how many steps he actually took or how long he walked, but we all know what happens next. The wind and the waves begin to make him doubt and he looks down and immediately starts sinking.

It's pretty understandable why Peter doubted. His fear caused him to take his eyes off Jesus and onto the waves crashing around him. Placed in his shoes, you and I would probably do the same. In fact, I think we often do. Do we trust God in everything, all the time? Do we boldly follow Jesus even when our lives become so busy and overwhelming? Do we trust God completely when illness plagues our bodies or a family member, or at the loss of a loved one? When money gets tight, do we continue to joyfully give of our time and money freely to God? The reality is that none of us completely trust God 100% of the time. We doubt that God is capable of handling all the problems in our lives. We'd rather trust in our own ability or in the abilities of other people for our rescue. And no matter how much we desire to follow God with our whole heart, and soul and mind, we will always fall short. It's in our nature. When push comes to shove, we often first look down in fear and doubt before crying out to God for help.

Martin Luther talked a lot about this disease of doubt that we have as humans, this disease that causes us to always look down when. I don't know if you've ever heard the term navel-gazer, but it's usually used to refer to someone who's obsessed with themselves. They don't really care much about the people or the world around them. Martin Luther described in one of his books on Romans that since the fall that we're all spiritual navel-gazers, born looking down staring at our belly button. We're completely self-absorbed and self-focused, stuck in a cycle of sin that leads us to look to ourselves instead of to God. Instead of being completely faithful and trusting of God our Father, we have the tendency to focus inward on ourselves. Whether it's in our homes, families, or in our church, we are by nature always looking down. And like Peter, when we look down, when we allow our fears and doubts to take our full attention, even though we have faith, we like Peter doubt God's power to reach out and save us when times get tough.

But it didn't just end there. As Peter was sinking Jesus doesn't just look down at him, he immediately reached out his hand and grabbed him. Peter was completely helpless, drowning because of his own doubt, but Jesus saved him nonetheless. Even Peter, the one bold enough to step out of the boat in faith needed God to save him. And God reaches out to you and me as well. He's got a track record. He's not a God who just looks down on us and watches us sink. He is actively reaching out with mercy and grace to the entire world. There's a common misunderstanding in our world today that God is only active in this world to and for those who have strong faith. If we just pray hard enough, or really truly trust in him of course He has to shower us with blessing. But throughout Scripture and in this story we see that God acts not because of our faith, but so that we can have faith! God acts even when we don't deserve it! He sent His only Son down to us at Christmas. He led a perfect life, suffered the punishment that we deserved, and rose.

And he continues to reach out to all people in many different ways. The Holy Spirit works through our relationships with people, through little nudges to go to church, to read God's word, to pray when we're at the end of our rope. When we feel prompted to talk to a friend when they are going through a hard time. That's God reaching down through us to give mercy to others. And even if we don't always realize when God is

with us, we know He promises to always be with us in His church. No matter how much we fail to trust God, He's at the ready to forgive us as sure as sun will rise. Our Baptism holds us through our doubts. It's not some decision that we made to follow and trust God, its God reaching down to our drowning soul and saying I've got you. You're mine! In the Lord's Supper, Christ reaches out to us to say, "Eat my body, drink my blood. Don't just hear my words of forgiveness, taste it, digest it. I'm with you, even when you forget me". We too can hear Christ's question "Why did you doubt?" and know that He constantly reaches down to show us we don't have to.

As we step out of the boat in faith, we will absolutely continue to doubt, but it gets easier to trust God over time. As we see over and over again in our lives evidence that God is faithful even when we are not, we become stronger in our faith and the storms don't affect us as much. It took a great step of faith for me to consider the ministry. I never wanted to become a pastor growing up. After seeing how emotionally difficult my dad's job was at times, not to mention the long years of school and having to get up in front of hundreds of people to speak on a weekly basis, I definitely had my doubts. I doubted that I had what it took. I doubted that this was really the path that God was leading me on. But over time God showed me through relationships and experience that He indeed was leading me on this journey. After receiving encouragement and support, it was as though God was telling me that this is right. And the more that happened, the easier it was to commit myself further and the doubts didn't seem as overwhelming.

Where is Christ calling you to step out in faith and follow him? For some of you it could be to start a new family devotion in your home. For others of you it is to get more involved in ministry here at church or to take on some form of leadership. For yet others of you it could be to reach out to friend or neighbor who is going through a rough time. Wherever it is that God is calling you to, I can promise you that you will be tempted to look down. You will feel overwhelmed, doubting yourself and God that He is truly calling and leading you down this path. But its in those times that we don't have to continue looking down and sinking. But as we lift our eyes we see Jesus reaching out to us from the cross, his strong grip of mercy and grace and strength guiding us through the storm.

God calls us to some pretty amazing things in our lives. Walking on water seems a bold and difficult task indeed. In our families, in our church, he calls us to risk love, to give of ourselves, to let the love of Christ live through us for those in our lives who don't know Him. We'll be tempted to look down. When we step out of the boat in faith, we can be sure that the storms will come and we will doubt what we're doing. We'll doubt that God is strong enough to get us through. But let this painting be a reminder for you today. Don't look down. Keep your eyes on the Cross where Jesus is reaching out with His strong grip to guide you through. God bless you. Amen.

Vicar Joel Beyer  
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