

The Rescuing Hand

Matthew 14:22-33

My Uncle Bob Rainer could do just about anything. At least that was what I thought when I was a child, and even as an adult, I'm still pretty convinced of it. Uncle Bob lived with his wife and two girls not too far from our family home in Mobile, Alabama. Behind his house he had built a garage with an apartment above it. He constructed a substantial addition to his home. But then came the wonderful news that Uncle Bob was building an in-ground swimming pool! The boys in our family were so excited that we were going to have a place to swim! And when the pool was finished, we did spend a lot of time over there.

I very distinctly remember my uncle throwing handfuls of coins into the water in the deep end, telling us that we could keep all we retrieved. I recall the day my older brother lost his hard contact lens in the water, and how we were all amazed when someone found it. But I also remember the day I dove in on one side to swim to the other. When I had swum as far as I thought I should, I reached out with my hands to grab the concrete side of the pool. But it wasn't there! So I did what any eight- or nine-year-old kid would do in that kind of situation.

I panicked. My arms started flailing, and I got my head above the water just enough to cry out "Help!" It seemed like an eternity, but suddenly, Uncle Bob was there, standing at the edge of the pool. He reached down, grabbed one of my arms, and yanked me out of the water. And there I was, sitting on the side of the pool, with my legs still dangling in the water. I had been only inches from the side of the pool, but didn't realize it.

I didn't walk on any water, but at least there is something Peter and I have in common. We both know what it is like to be in the water, feeling as though you're going to drown. We both know what it is like to cry out helplessly for someone to rescue you. We both know what it is like to have someone you trust reach out his hand and pull you up. Last week we were with Peter and the other disciples as they tried to deal with a storm on the Sea of Galilee, with Jesus with them in the boat, but asleep on a cushion. Today we find another storm on the Sea of Galilee, but this time Jesus isn't in the boat with them. The disciples are all by themselves, in the middle of a storm, in the middle of a rather large lake, after straining at the oars all night trying to make it across.

Jesus had made them get into the boat to go to the other side, while He went up on a mountainside to pray. We are familiar enough with the story to know what happened. Toward morning the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, but they thought He was a ghost. Verse 26 tells us that they were "*terrified*," and that they "*cried out in fear*," and Matthew used a word here that says these grown men "screamed" in terror.

In verse 27, Jesus told them *“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”* When Jesus was here in human flesh, there were a lot of things happening that people didn’t understand. It continues as a truth to this day that we are most afraid of things we don’t understand. Several times in His earthly ministry did Jesus say “Take courage!” He said it to the paralyzed man whose friends brought to Jesus (Mt 9:2). He said it to the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, who reached out in the crowd to touch His cloak (Mt. 9:22). He said it to His disciples in the Upper Room just before His arrest (John 16:33). Now He shouts it to them here above the noise of the wind, and their own frightened screams of terror. In *your* situation, in *your* fear, in *your* panic, hear the voice of Jesus, telling *you* “Take courage!”

Peter heard Him, so he said, *“Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.”* So Jesus said, in verse 29, *“Come.”* So Peter got out of the boat, and started walking on the water—the only sinful human being ever to do so! Not even the greatest prophets in the Old Testament had done this! We don’t know how far he walked, but he was definitely walking on top of the water. The situation changes in verse 30: *“But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”* There has been much made of the fact that Peter was able to walk on the water *until* he took his eyes off Jesus. When he looked instead at his surroundings, he sank like a rock. And that was definitely true. And it was true that when Jesus reached out His hand, He said to Peter, *“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”* The word “doubt” there means “to stand uncertainly at two ways,” as if you were at a fork in the road and didn’t know which way to go. Peter started out wonderfully, but wavered when he saw two ways instead of one. It was having an option between walking on the water or sinking beneath the waves that got him.

But before we come down too hard on him for his lack of faith, we need to point out that at least Peter got out of the boat! At least Peter was willing to take a risk and try something which did not make sense to him or anyone else—just because Jesus said so! The other disciples were content to remain in the boat. They had been frightened by the storm, and wearied by struggling against it. Then as the dark skies turn to the gray of the morning, they see Jesus on the water, but imagine He was a ghost. Their lack of faith caused them to see what logic would expect them to see. They had never seen a man walking on water before, so when their eyes actually took in a sight like that, their brains couldn’t accept it.

Lack of faith does that to us. It causes us to see only what our eyes can see. It prevents us from doing anything beyond the realm of immediate possibility. Lack of faith causes us to sit dumbfounded in the boat, while others walk on water. Boat people see ghosts on the water. Water-walking people see Jesus walking across the very thing that frightens us. Boat people don’t do anything for the Kingdom of God except what they can logically accomplish in their

own strength. Water-walking people have a desire to be closer to Jesus, and do what He says to do, even if it makes absolutely no sense from a human standpoint.

Boat people say “The waves may be tossing us around, but it’s safer here than out there on the water.” Water-walking people say “I’d rather be out there on the water acting out of obedience to what Jesus says than sitting in that little boat.” The Church has far too many boat people, people whose fear and doubt cause them to sit still when Jesus says “Come!” or “Do!” or “Go!” The Church has too few water-walking people, those who not only are willing to do what Jesus says, but even ask for the privilege. When was the last time you prayed that God would stretch your faith where you could do something unheard of?

Who was it that walked on the water? Peter. Not the other eleven disciples. What distinguished Peter from the other disciples, other than the obvious faith in Jesus? What practical point made the difference? Anyone can sit in the boat and watch! Peter is the one who got out of the boat!

So Peter did get out of the boat, and walk toward Jesus. But when he began to sink, he cried out. Years later when Peter wrote his first letter, he quoted from Psalm 34: “*The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.*” The Scripture says in verse 31 “*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.*” When we are sinking, we, too, can cry out to Jesus. And as Peter did, we, too, can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus in our lives. It is a good thing you are here today, because right now you may be in need of the Rescuing Hand of Jesus in your life. In your little boat, being tossed around by your circumstances, take courage!

1 We can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus when we are battered by the storm, v. 24

We read in verse 24 that the boat the disciples were in was being “*buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*” The word “buffeted” is a word that means “to torture,” and I’m sure after rowing all night, straining against the oars, fighting the waves that threatened to overturn them, wondering where Jesus was and why He sent them alone, those disciples certainly felt tortured.

In our lives, and in our day, we may feel the same way. The circumstances never seem to let up. The situation never changes. Every day may feel as though you are being tortured. You may be in such a place right now. You may feel battered, buffeted, even tortured, by your particular set of circumstances. When that happens to us, we may feel as though God is too far away, that He doesn’t care. But Isaiah 43:2 reads, “*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.*”

God often puts us in great emergencies, because the only way we *grow up* in Him is to *go through* those emergencies and trials. As Peter did, you can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus reaching down into your situation, lifting you, pulling you up out of it. You must cry out to Him. You must reach out for Him. Whatever the circumstances we may find ourselves in, we can cry out to Him.

2 We can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus when we are alone in the dark, v. 25

Verse 25 tells us that Jesus went out to them, walking on the water, “*during the fourth watch of the night.*” According to the ancient system of time, the nighttime hours were divided into four periods, or watches. The first watch began at six o’clock in the evening, and lasted till nine; the second ended at twelve midnight; the third began at twelve, and ended at three; and the fourth began at three, and ended at six in the morning. So when Jesus came to them, it was between three and six in the morning, the darkest time of the night.

Let’s apply this to ourselves. What is your “Fourth Watch”? I think for us the Fourth Watch could represent times of hopelessness and helplessness we all feel from time to time. Your Fourth Watch could be your darkest hour, the period in your life when you can’t see how you’re going to make it through, when all hope appears to be gone. When the dark closes in on you, and the darkness is so thick it is almost like a living thing, choking you, when you find yourself alone in the gloom that clouds your soul, know this for a certainty: cry out to Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ will even then, even when your faith is small, reach out His Mighty Hand toward you.

That’s when you can know the presence of Jesus in your life. That’s when you can feel the Rescuing Hand of the Lord Christ, reaching down into your situation, lifting you out of it. There is never a night, or situation, so dark, that our Lord Jesus cannot find you. Every pain, every grief, every night of loneliness, every hour of sickness, every wave of despair that washes over your head, comes because He has commanded it, and intends it for some great good you could not have otherwise.

3 We can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus when our best isn’t good enough, vv. 29-30

The disciples had been straining at the oars after rowing most of the night, but they were only halfway across. These were not weak men, but still they were only halfway. Sometimes in spite of all our strength and skill and know-how, the best we can do is only half as good as it needs to be.

And look at Peter! What he was doing—walking on the water!—was beyond the realm of human possibility. People just do not walk on top of the water. Yet he was doing it! But his faith only took him so far. When he reached the end of it, he began to sink. His own eyes did not believe what was happening to him. At that point, Peter’s best was simply not good enough.

There may be occasions in our lives when we face something bigger than we are, when we are up against something for which our own strength isn’t enough. We may struggle and conspire and try to figure out a way to get it done, but nothing works. There is a challenge in front of you—what do you do? Are you even now straining against the oars? Are you even now looking around you, seeing the wind and waves, rather than walking confidently across the water?

Are you waiting to do some great work, waiting until it doesn’t take faith? Are you going to witness, teach, lead, or serve as soon as you can understand how you can do it in your strength? Here’s some good news: your best isn’t good enough! And that’s good news because you don’t have to try to figure it out. You don’t have to measure up! We’re talking about faith and grace and mercy. Our Heavenly Father knows that we are but dust. And just at the point where we are going under, He reaches down His mighty, omnipotent Hand for us.

4 We can feel the Rescuing Hand of Jesus when we are about to give up, vv. 30-31

Look at verse thirty to see what happened to Peter. “*But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’*” Pay attention to this. When Peter began to sink, it was not like he was in quicksand, where he slowly sank beneath the waves. The word translated “sink” there means “to plunge.” It was almost as if Peter stepped off the end of a diving board. He probably even went completely under. That sudden plunge into the water, in the dark, may have caused Peter to panic.

One instant he’s walking on the water with Jesus—what a rush that must have been!—the next he’s looking around, noticing how fierce the wind was, perhaps hearing some in the boat telling him that he shouldn’t try such foolish things, and *splash!* Into the water he goes, perhaps dropping so far down that the water went completely over his head, with such suddenness that he may not have even had time to catch his breath.

Panic is a strange thing. It takes over our hearts and emotions, even our minds, with such suddenness that we don’t have time to steel ourselves against it. It causes us to see the worst things, to focus on the conditions around us, to listen to others tell us that what we’re attempting is impossible. It makes us think that our only possible solution is to give up.

In Psalm 46:5, we see the words, *God will help her at break of day*. The King James Version reads, “right early,” instead of “break of day.” The words literally mean “at the turn of morning,” when means the time when night changes to day. The idea is that God helps at just the right time. You can certainly count on God to help you when you need it most. He will never be too early, and He is never too late.

One of the places we give up first is in the area of prayer. Our darkness whispers to us that God isn't listening, so why bother? But our Heavenly Father is indeed listening; He does indeed hear us when we call to Him. Don't give up! Fight your way back to the surface, and sputter out the prayer, “Lord, save me!” Do you notice how short that prayer is? When you're in trouble, short prayers are long enough! In faith reach out to Him and feel His Rescuing Hand grasp yours so firmly that you know you're safe, that He'll never let you go.

The Lord reached out His Rescuing Hand to Peter. Verse 31 reads, “*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.*” Peter had scarcely sputtered out his cry when Jesus grabbed him. So does He respond now—to you and me.

I am so grateful that Uncle Bob was there to rescue me when I panicked. I am so grateful he reached down into the water and yanked me out of it. Had he not been there, I might have drowned only inches from the side of the pool. But more than that, my Lord Jesus has reached down His hand and rescued me:

*Once my soul was astray from the heavenly way
I was wretched and vile as could be
But my Saviour in love gave me peace from above
When he reached down his hand for me.*

*When he reached down his hand for me
When he reached down his hand for me
I was lost and undone without God or His son
When he reached down his hand for me.*

*I was nearing despair when He came to me there
And he showed me that I could be free
Then he lifted my feet, gave me gladness complete
When he reached down his hand for me.*