

# **Like a Rock**

**“Train your eyes.”**  
**Matthew 14:29-31**

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May 30, 2010  
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## **Stepping Out**

I have looked into the face of death. It came about when my parents decided that it was time that I learn how to swim and there was an opportunity through the City Recreation Department for children to get free summer lessons down at a pool that was about a mile away from home. They enrolled me and every day I walked with a bunch of friends that long way through the neighborhood and across one very busy road down to the pool.

It was a wonderful place – not at all like the pools you usually see. It was huge and round. At any point around the circumference you’d step into shallow waters and be able to wade and splash your way toward the center until you reached a fence that separated the outside shallows from the center deeps. In the very middle of this circle was an island with a tower. On the tower, positioned in several places, were diving boards: spring boards and low boards and high boards from which you’d see kids flying through the air like graceful swans or dropping like rocks, knees tuck beneath their chins to splash in the water like cannon balls. It was a wonderful place filled with energy and laughter and lifted voice.

Each morning we learned our lessons until we could swim free style: first in the shallows, then through the opening of the fence and into the deeps, and finally all the way to the tower. Then one day near the end of our lessons, our instructor told us we were going to learn to dive. The spring board, on the first day, was not so bad. The low board was a little more harrowing. Then came the day of the high board.

I remember the cold, hard imprints the grated steel steps made on the bottoms of my feet with every step upward. I arrived at the top and inched out on the board where the wind blew and eagles soared. I had never been so high off the water. I looked down. Never before had the pool looked so tiny. I thought, “If I jumped off this precipice, might I miss the water altogether and go crashing to my death somewhere on neighboring cement?” I said to the instructor, who was now right behind me, “I can’t do it.” I froze.

Have you ever had to take the step?

### **Facing It**

I think this is something like Peter faced that day on the water. It wasn't just the waves and the winds. They would have been bad enough in themselves. But this storm had to happen when everything else started getting threatening already.

It's right after Peter and Jesus and the rest got word that their friend John the Baptist had been put to death by King Herod. It must have served as a kind of tipping point. Nothing would have seemed the same again. All the days filled with electric hope and naïve expectation seems to have evaporated in the face of cold reality. All their talk of *do unto others* and *turning the other cheek* and their call to belong to God's Kingdom rather than Caesar's or Herod's was turning out to be deadly dangerous.

They had pulled away to catch their breath. They wanted to pray and be alone. They were scared.

Now this.

Jesus sent them off alone. First time. He cast them off while he'd stay back in the mountains to pray. And they were without him. Never mind that they fished for a living – most of them – and had spent their lives in boats on the Lake. The sea was always a force of primordial chaos, held at bay by the creative power of God but always threatening. It evoked images of death and the power that threatens the goodness of life. And here they were in their fragile little boat: the only thing keeping them safe from the threat.<sup>1</sup>

And Jesus wasn't with them.

That's when the wind began to descend from the hills and the waters turned angry – churning with whitecaps – pitching the boat from one-side-to-the-other, back-and-forth. Wind – wanting to blow them straight overboard. I can picture them with white-knuckled grip holding onto lines and straining at the oars.

They were looking death in the face.

When they see the form of a man approaching on the waters, it wasn't Jesus they expected. A ghost; the angel of Death: that's what they thought. And they froze...Until they heard his voice: "Take courage!"

The first Sunday of the year Chuck Gaidica told us that storms in life are sure to come: something that has to do with your health or the loss of a job or struggles at work; something overwhelming a relationship, tearing it apart; an accident; a law suit; someone attacking your character. Storms that threaten to capsize your boat and bring you down.

What are you going to do when the storm comes? Freeze? Hold back?

Matthew probably had a hope about the impact this tale about Jesus would make on his readers. Carried in the vessel of the church, they were cast upon stormy seas of persecution. It was also a dangerous time. He might have seen that they had frozen up; that their faith was being tested as though they were all alone and all they could see was the peril of the night. Maybe his readers would see themselves in the boat with Peter and then they might take heart in what happened.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus walked on the water, he wasn't just defying gravity and the principles of physics. When Jesus walked on the water, he'd just come from the mountain where he'd been in communion with God in prayer. When Jesus walked on the water, he had overcome all the chaos about him. All the news about John's death and all the reality about the pressures that were calling him to stop what he was saying and do what he was doing.

It seems the powers of death and evil wanted him to freeze up. But he was walking on their waters of chaos subduing them. That's the power in this story. Jesus was walking on the chaos. He was not to be overcome.

When they heard Jesus' voice, Peter called out, Lord, if it's you tell me to come out and walk on the water; and Jesus said, "Come."

Then as long as he kept his eyes focused on Jesus, he stepped out of the boat...

Walking on water...

subduing the forces of chaos himself.

Peter had been the first to say Jesus is Christ, God's anointed One who would be our Savior. And Jesus said to him, Simon bar Jonah (the name he was given at birth): you are Peter – the Rock. And on this rock I'll build my church." The rock is not just the guy, Simon, who was brash and inconsistent like maybe we all are. It was Simon with faith. His faith is that on which the church would be built.

That faith came through on the waters.

All it took was a little faith.

Church: That's what Matthew wants you to have: O listener of this tale.

After the first shock Laura and I shared when we heard her diagnosis, the initial explanation her doctor gave was that it was a slow-growing and small tumor that would easily be taken care of.

Just a little case of cancer. Maybe just a little uninvited adventure.

Then further examinations and a study of family history suggested that the matter was far more serious. The specialist moved her surgery from over a month away to as-soon-as-he-could. I remember the moments we spent alone in the consultation room when he stepped out. Laura said to me, "I guess this isn't so fun anymore."

If you were to ask me who my heroes are I would name just a few. Laura would be one of them. Before she went into surgery she wrote in her blog,

Holy God  
Great is your faithfulness.  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.

Many years ago  
when my dad had cancer  
I told him I was thankful for all the healthy cells.

Today, I am thankful for all my healthy cells  
and for all the ones that used to be.  
And for Dr. Hakim who said they need to come out  
And for Dr. Malviya who said they need to come out today.

...I am thankful for all the healthy cells

And I thankful for my mother's womb  
That carried me and my brother and my sister

I am thankful for this morning  
for this time with you.

This was her storm. It was one of those that threatened life, itself. Yet, she faced it like a rock. She trained her eyes on Jesus and it got her through. Still scary in its way: it will ever get her through.

### **Shoved**

I was standing on the diving board, my little body wet and shivering in the cold with all the little friends shivering, waiting in line. "I can't do it!" I said. "I'll get down now." But the instructor said, "No. All you have to do is this: you see that light pole out beyond the pool?"

"Yes," I said. He said, "Look at it and keep looking at it." And I did.

That's when he gave me a push.

Sometimes it takes the hand of one greater than you to get you through it.  
Sometimes it takes a hand of one greater than you to bring you to subdue the chaos.  
Sometimes it's the hand of the greater One will open to you a whole new world.

May you train your eyes. See yourself in company with Peter. Like the Rock in the midst of the storm, keep your eyes on Jesus.

May you keep him in focus with a little faith. That's all it takes to step out of the boat...

and sometimes get the push you need.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. VIII. Nashville: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 327.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. p 328.