

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Matthew 14:22-33

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<sup>22</sup>Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>23</sup>After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

<sup>25</sup>During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. <sup>26</sup>When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

<sup>27</sup>But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." <sup>28</sup>"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup>"Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup>Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup>And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. <sup>33</sup>Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Good news, walking on water isn't just for messiahs and their closest buddies anymore. Thanks to modern scientific advancements, namely the development of plexiglass, you and I can now visit the Sea of Galilee and, if we've got an extra ten bucks, walk across a piece of plexiglass suspended just above the water to get our picture taken, "walking on water." I wish I was joking but I'm not. Some folks will capitalize on anything, even a sacred Biblical text, to make a buck. Granted, I've stood in that silly plastic barrel made to look like it's going over Niagara Falls, crowding in with the rest of my family sporting feigned looks of terror on our faces—but somehow it seems the "Walking on Water" tourist trap is taking it a bit too far.

But in way it would be nice if—for ten bucks—we could buy ourselves a miracle. What miracle would you buy? Would you ask for a loved one back? Would you ask to be healed of some disease? Would you think big and ask for an end to world hunger, AIDS, or war? It would be hard for me to decide on just what miracle I'd want most. But decisions like those are the territory of fairy tales, children's movies, and cheap tabloids headlines we read while trying really hard not to look like we're reading them as we wait in line to buy our groceries.

What qualifies an event as a miracle? Is it something that is beyond explanation or does it have to go beyond even that qualification and be the achieving of something that is seemingly impossible—like walking on water or bringing a dead man back to life? Jesus did both of these and because people witnessed those miracles, they believed in him—they openly declared—as did the disciples in this story—Truly you are the Child of God! They believed he was different, special, divine, the very child of God because that was the only way to explain how he could do those miraculous things.

But what about us? How are we to believe when we don't see anybody walking on water and no one we know has been brought back from death to life? Where are our miracles?

Some of you may be thinking that we are surrounded by miracles—a blooming flower, a new baby, healing from chronic illness—all of these could be considered miracles. But

the disciples and other folks of Jesus' time had all of these same things we consider miracles and yet they did not believe that Jesus was anything more than a really special guy until those moments in which he did the "real" miracles—when he did the impossible, the unheard of, the unexplainable. So where are our impossibles, unheard of and unexplainables? Where, in a word, is our PROOF.

Well, as far as I'm concerned, there isn't any proof and I'm skeptical of stories of modern miracles. I don't rely on miracles—I look to science, nature, or common sense for explanations—not the super-natural to explain those miracles that seem truly impossible. I'm skeptical, really skeptical, of miracles because I think they set folks up with false expectations. If, because you're a person of faith, you believe miracles happen then you may be tempted into thinking that you can expect miracles or, because you pay your pledge and volunteer, you deserve a miracle. But then, when the time comes that you really need a miracle, if it doesn't happen you wonder what went wrong? Where's your miracle, and your lack of a miracle can begin to make you doubt God, question your faith, and wonder if there's something wrong with you. After all, the scriptures tell us that it only takes the tiniest amount of faith to achieve the miracle of moving mountains so surely if you have faith, asking for the miracle of being healed from illness should be easy—it should happen in no time at all because, after all, you believe.

I remember learning that verse about faith moving mountains as a child. But, seeings as I grew up in Northwest Ohio, which is seemingly one of the flattest places on earth, there were no mountains to try to move with my faith. So instead, I tried to move my pencil. I would put a pencil in the middle of my desk in elementary school and then stare at it—concentrating all of my efforts into moving that pencil. I believed, I believed in God and loved God and thought that I could move that pencil by virtue of my faith. Well, the only time that pencil ever moved was when Jason Storrs, a real bully, walked by and purposefully knocked it on the floor.

And so, I don't rely on miracles. I'm not standing before you telling you that they do or do not exist—after all, who am I to make those kind of declarations. But what I can tell you, is that I have not found miracles to be reliable. You can't count on them.

Now, this is surely not to say that God is not reliable and that you can't count on God. But counting on God is different from counting on miracles. Miracles—maybe they happen, maybe they don't. God—well, the good news is that God is definitely happening. The good news is that God is right there in the muck-a-dee-muck with you. The good news—the gospel—at least according to Markku—is that God holds you up.

I don't know how many of you caught it a few Sundays back when—in a children's message, our very own little Markku Smith said that God holds us up. I read the children a story about a man walking on water and when I asked what the story teaches us, Markku said that it teaches us that God holds us up. That's his gospel—his good news. And that, that is the crux of our life as people of faith—that we, like Markku, have a gospel, that we believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ—not that we experience miracles or have the faith to walk on water.

Sometimes we mistakenly say, of the books in the New Testament, that there is the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Matthew, or the Gospel of John. Well, that's not really correct. The gospel—the good news—is not about Mark or Matthew or John. It is the Good News—the gospel of Jesus Christ—according to those disciples. They are simply telling the stories of Jesus as they interpret them. They each believe the good news and tell the stories of Jesus in slightly different ways. Each of the first four books of the New Testament is a person's interpretation of the Good News the Jesus Christ had to tell. The good news that all of us are loved. The good news that all of us are forgiven. The good news that the social trappings of our society—wealth, power, fame, success—mean absolutely nothing to God. The good news that death is not the final word, that because of Jesus we all have been promised eternal life with God—eternal love, wholeness, reunion with our maker and the communion of saints who have gone before us. That's the good news and each of the evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story in slightly different ways.

So instead of asking what miracle you would wish for, a more suitable question might be—what's your gospel of Jesus Christ? If you were to write the The Gospel according to Marion or Jerry or Debbie or Edith or Dave or Bob—what would you write? When you boil it down, what's the good news for you? For Markku, it's knowing that God holds him up. But what is it for you? What is it about Jesus that is good news to you—here and now? Why is it that you're here and not somewhere cooler this morning? How would you write about the good news of Jesus Christ as you've experienced it?

When I was interviewed for this position, one of the questions was something like—how would you explain Jesus to someone who has never heard of him? That's a good question—a middle eastern guy who lived about 2000 years ago who was born into the working class and lived about 33 years and during those last three years of life went around the countryside preaching and teaching and then was arrested and finally crucified by officials of the Roman government. And that would be a decent answer—as historically accurate as we can make it. But that's not what I'm asking. What I'm asking is—how would you explain what it's like to have a relationship with Jesus Christ? What difference does it make in your life? How are you different because of Jesus? None of us are like Peter who was different because Jesus helped him to walk on water, but hopefully we are different because we believe. What do you do that you probably wouldn't do if you didn't believe in Jesus? What do you believe that you probably wouldn't believe if you didn't believe in Jesus? What's the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to you?

As you ponder your response, I'll share what the Gospel According to Robin is. The good news of Jesus Christ is that no matter how much I've screwed up or hurt other people, I don't have to beat myself up because I'm forgiven and God loves me no matter what.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that this life is not as good as it gets, that there is a sweet by and by where the best moments of my life—my wedding, Nathan's birth, my ordination—will be nothing compared to the glory of heaven.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that I'm never, ever alone.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that I matter to someone.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that it's okay to be vulnerable, to express myself, and to not feel like I have to take on the world by myself. I can depend on God to help me through the communities I am blessed to be part of.

And, I have to agree with Markku, the good news of Jesus Christ is that God holds me up.

I can't answer the question for you—I don't know what the gospel according to you is. But I sure do hope you've got one, because it's knowing the good news of Jesus Christ—not just in your head but also in your heart—that is the real miracle of being alive. It's the good news that sustains us. It's the good news that holds us together in community. That good news is why we're here this morning.