

Why Did You Doubt Me? Sunday, 1/17/21

It's funny how some things from your childhood get lodged firmly in your memory. One that resurfaced for me when pondering the doubting disciples was of my middle school tech ed teacher, Mr Ryer. I'll never forget standing on the woodshop floor with him. I can't recall what we were talking about, but I remember one response quite vividly. "Did you hear that?," he said. "What?," I replied. "I just heard a 'yeah, but' bird fly overhead!," he said. "A 'yeahbut' bird?," I replied, as a perfectly clueless straight-man to his joke. He responded by giving voice to this mythical bird's call: "Yeah, but! Yeah, but!" This is actually a photo of a King Vulture, but it's one strange version of what I imagine this fictional bird might look like.

A similar scene could have unfolded with Jesus and his first disciples, who frequently came down with a case of the "yeah, buts." In our first account from Matthew, we basically heard this: "Yeah, you said you are the Son of God, but how are we going to feed all these people?" As soon as they took their eyes off of Jesus and allowed themselves to be distracted by the crowd, they set themselves up for a fall. So when Jesus suggested that they feed the crowd, instead of looking to Jesus to provide for them, all they could do was complain that they weren't up to the task. "'But we only have five loaves of bread and two fish!,' They answered."¹ Yeah, but. The contradiction of first affirming what we believe about Jesus, but then demonstrating a lack of faith.

To be fair, doubt does seem to be a natural part of our faith journey, and the first disciples were probably no more doubtful and clueless than we are today. I'm honestly skeptical when I meet a Christian who says they've never experienced any doubt along with their faith. But over and over again, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus drives away the "Yeah, but" birds and insists that his followers demonstrate faith by placing complete trust in God.

Just like us, the disciples found that lesson hard to learn, as we rejoin them on their journey with Jesus, immediately following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. I'm continuing in chapter 14 of Matthew, verse 22, in the New Living Translation.

¹ Matthew 14:17. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

{Read Matthew 14:22-33 NLT}

It's easy to confuse this account of the disciples quaking in fear on the stormy waters with another one that appears earlier in Matthew², this time with Jesus sitting in the boat instead of passing by while walking on water. In both accounts though, the disciples feared for their lives and Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith. Can you hear the “Yeah, but” bird fly overhead? “Yeah, I saw you feed the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish, but now that my skin is on the line, I'm not quite so sure about your miracle credentials!”

Don't we do something similar, all the time? I've found that it's relatively easy to affirm the goodness of God when life seems to be going my way. It doesn't take much headwind, however, to take my eyes off of Jesus and let the fear start to build when it appears that circumstances have taken a turn for the worse. That's happened to me on more than one occasion this past year, as I've struggled to know the right way to lead the church through this pandemic. It's happened to me each time someone from the congregation has passed on to be with the Lord, and I haven't been able to offer the kind of saying-goodbye rituals and in-person pastoral support that we've relied on all our lives.

But the truth is that fear and doubt aren't recent inventions of this pandemic. They've been with us all our lives. Where do you struggle most with fear and doubt? When do you say, “Yeah, but” to Jesus? Our challenge is to find a way to keep our eyes on Jesus instead of our problems, so we don't sink beneath the waves.

I've said before that I think Peter got himself into his own mess here by putting God to the test. It was, after all, Peter's idea to go for a walk on the water. But regardless of how Peter got into his watery predicament, there he was, sinking beneath the choppy sea. Surely that's a situation we can all relate to. Things are cruising along according to plan, until suddenly they're not. You slip on the ice and wind up in the hospital. Your doctor calls with an unsettling diagnosis. You get furloughed or fired and you suddenly don't have enough money to pay the bills. In-person school and worship are shut down. Someone you've always counted on lets you down, or even worse, they suddenly aren't there anymore to

² Matthew 8:23-27.

share in your life. It doesn't matter how we get to these moments of trouble, we all know that feeling that Peter must have had as he began to sink, and fear began to cloud his vision. To Peter's credit, he remembered that he wasn't alone, and instead of calling to his friends in the boat for a rescue, he did the most faith-filled thing he could, calling out to Jesus, "Save me, Lord!"³

That's actually not a very natural response, is it? Think about the last time you felt overwhelmed, felt like you were drowning. Perhaps you feel that way today. Aren't you more inclined to persevere on everything that's going wrong rather than crying out to God for help? Peter made a courageous and faithful choice, calling out to the only one capable of truly saving him from sleeping with the fishes. True, Jesus did chastise him for his lack of faith, but in the end, Peter did the faithful thing by putting his trust in Jesus.

In the midst of your trouble, have you mustered the faith required to call out to Jesus for help? Have you trusted your body and soul into his care, as completely as if you were about to sink beneath the waves? If not, what's holding you back? Do you doubt that Jesus can or will help you? Jesus is asking you today, "Why do you doubt me?"

Something that's often overlooked in this account is that Jesus did rescue Peter. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Peter, of all the disciples, is especially a work in progress in terms of his discipleship. And yet, Jesus not only saved him but put him in charge of leading the other disciples. Why? Jesus often talked about the importance of faith and linked faith to the outcome of prayer. Can you imagine a scenario where Jesus lined up all the disciples in the boat and said to them, "each of you come to me on the water. Whoever makes it without sinking is in, the rest of you are on your own." Of course not! That's just not within the character of Jesus, is it? I sometimes wonder if Jesus picked Peter to lead the church, not because of his sterling faith, but because of the transparency of his humanity. Peter clearly couldn't do it on the strength of his own credentials. Peter was flawed, and failed Jesus over and over again. And yet Jesus showed up just as many times, took Peter's hand in his hand, and lifted him up, out of the water, restoring him by the majesty of God's grace and power. To me that's the best news of this particular part of the Gospel: Not even

³ Matthew 14:30.

our doubts and stubborn denials of Jesus will keep him from extending his hand to us when we find ourselves sinking. It's easy to be put off by all the tough love Jesus showed the disciples, but when it really mattered, Jesus showed up and held out his hand. He did that on Christmas day. He did that in countless ways as he walked with the disciples. He did that on the cross of calvary. And he still does that today, offering us his Holy Spirit when we've given up on him and we're certain that the waves are about to take us under.

What are the waves that are threatening your faith today? Doubting Jesus might be a natural thing, but it's not helpful if it keeps us from reaching out and taking his hand. Have you set out your two chairs yet? If not, do it today. And I don't mean that metaphorically. Physically set up two chairs somewhere in your home: one for you, and one for Jesus. Then ask Jesus to meet you there, either this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Be sure to keep your appointment, because you can be certain that Jesus will be there waiting for you. If you have doubts, go ahead and bring them along with you. Jesus can handle them. But you have to choose to meet with Jesus. Jesus isn't the type to make you do anything. You don't have to walk on water to get there. It's ok if you're sinking, as long as you can muster the will to do at least that one thing that Peter did. Cry out to Jesus, with all the heart and will that's left in you, and lay it all on the line. "Save me, Lord!" Jesus may ask you about your doubt, but in the end you can be sure that Jesus will reach out, grab your hand, and never let go.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you'll keep your eyes on Jesus in the midst of your daily life. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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