

**The Federated Church of Hyannis**  
**Sermon for May 2, 2021 “Take Heart”**  
**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Adkins**  
**Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33**

The scene described in this morning’s Scripture reading of Jesus walking on water and meeting the disciples in the midst of the storm has provided subject matter for a number of artists, including the French Romantic artist, Delacroix. The painting is surreal, full of power, and mystery – just as the event itself must have been.

**According to the Gospel record**, the disciples had gone on ahead of him, out into the waters of the Sea of Galilee in their boat. As happened so frequently on the small inlet sea, a storm came up quickly and the disciples found themselves beaten by the wind and waves, and unable to make headway. They became quite distressed at their plight and despaired for their lives. Then, from a distance, in the murky blackness of pre-dawn, they saw the outline of a figure coming toward them, walking on the water. Being reasonable people, they could conclude only one thing: it must be something or someone supernatural – a ghost, as it were – and the thought struck terror within them.

**Now let us get the full picture here:** not one, but two causes for fright converged upon them – the storm that threatened their very lives, and now, from the early morning darkness, the figure of one walking upon the water. Both circumstances worked their minds and imaginations, creating a terrible fear. *But immediately*, as the Gospel reports, he spoke to them saying – *Take heart, it is I; have no fear (Mt. 14:27)*. The sheer force of personality leapt from his words. Note that he didn’t say, “Relax, the storm will cease. Don’t be afraid, there’s nothing to worry about.” No. First he said, “Take heart. It is I.”

One who has not considered the personal power of Jesus has not properly considered Christianity. By themselves, the grand moral and ethical dictates of the faith would be enough to make Christianity worthy of our allegiance: Love one another. Judge not. Do not repay evil with evil. How redemptive these commands are! But beyond them, giving them life as the atmosphere does our earth, is the loving figure of Jesus. *Take heart. It is I.*

**What would it have been like to have met him, this Jesus**, who breathed air as we do, who walked upon the earth as we, who felt tired on occasion, and experienced great sorrow and sadness as we, yet who mastered all these things? What would it have been like to have met him, the One who loved this life, yet announced again and again that it is only a foretaste of the greater life to come? What would it have been like to have met him, this Jesus who was religious, and yet whose religion broke through the bonds of piety and pretense and hypocrisy of those around him?

**One thing we know is that those who met him were forever transformed by the experience.** No one who met him ever remained indifferent.

There have been, and still are, magnetic personalities who draw others to them. Churchill said of Roosevelt that meeting him was like opening your first bottle of champagne. John Watson wrote concerning Henry Drummond, “He had only to walk into a room for everyone to know how impoverished they were.” We have all, at one point or another, met someone whose personal and spiritual depths illuminated the thread-bare areas of our own souls.

But none could charge human emotion as Jesus – none has had such immediate and lasting impact as he; none has spoken to the human condition as clearly as he; none has provided such an example of self-giving love as he. No one who has ever met him – truly met him – has stayed the same.

Go back to the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There at the outset of his ministry a man with what is described as an “unclean spirit” encountered him. Think what we will about what the New Testament meant in talking about persons possessed with unclean spirits – was it what we today would call a mental illness; was it an unusual physical malady that afflicted him not only physically, but mentally as well? No one really knows. What matters were the encounters such persons had with Jesus. When the man in Mark, chapter one, with such a spirit encountered Jesus, he cried out, *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* Time and again the demon possessed, the distraught, the helpless and hopeless, were caught up by the sheer power of his character, as his presence and his voice penetrated their personal darkness: *Take heart; it is I.*

**Every so often I encounter people who say they have nothing to live for.** Life has beaten them down, dealt them its cruelest blow. They see no reason for getting up each day. “Leave me in the blackness of the night,” they say. And I think of how the voice of the Master traveled the eerie darkness of that early morning to a group of men wearied and beaten by the storm.

“Take heart; it is I; be not afraid.”

*Sir Winston Churchill once said that human beings may be divided into three classes: those who are billed to death; those who are worried to death; and those who are bored to death.” (p.268, Churchill by James Humes).*

I will not suggest that the Lord will pay all of our bills or rid us of boredom and worry. But if we have our perspective attuned properly toward him, we will find strength for confronting such things. For he speaks the reassuring word to us as we struggle with our own storms. Have faith. Believe in God. All things are possible to those who believe. How much more God cares for you. *Take heart. It is I; be not afraid.*

**One New Testament writer points out that the Greek words which are translated, *It is I*, can also be interpreted to mean, “I am.”**

Early Christians who lived in a Greek-speaking world would have known of this second-possible meaning, “Take heart; I am; be not afraid.” Jesus is, God is, that’s the word for our time. It’s the word which makes darkness toleearable and defeat endurable. “Take heart, I am, be not afraid.”

Every so often one hears it said that we no longer have any heroes. There’s no one for our young people to look up to, no one for them to copy, no model of virtue left. Perhaps. But are we at the same time giving them a faith based not just on being a nice person who tries to follow the Golden Rule and a few moral precepts, but founded upon a person who was himself the embodiment of virtue and goodness? You see, the Christian faith does not finally consist of laws and commandment, but of a person being God’s best sent to us on our behalf.

Jesus gave us not just the word of God, but as the Gospel of John reminds us, he is the Word of God. Those who wrangle over written Scripture and what this or that text means forget that standing behind the words of the Bible is the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. Some Christians would do far better if they worried less about whether they have interpreted a passage correctly, and instead focused more on whether they have caught a glimpse of the towering figure of Jesus. That same Jesus, as Albert Schweitzer put it, comes to us as One unknown, as he came to the disciples by the sea. It is when our eyes are turned upon him, and we seek to follow him and be like him that we discover what it is to be Christian. All who seek and yearn for a better life, and for strength to meet the challenges of the day, find that he comes to them in their darkness as He did to the disciples. And he speaks to them – to you and to me – the self-same words,

“Take heart; it is I; be not afraid.” Amen.