

<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." (Matthew 14:22-33)

### More than Just Math

The other day, I saw one of our teachers scraping tape from last year off of her door. The day before that, I saw another teacher stapling things to the bulletin board in his classroom. The floors have all been stripped and waxed. Desks are in place. Tonight, we have a back to school night. By Wednesday, everything has to be ready. Of course, this year, getting ready has involved a whole new set of issues relating to the COVID virus. But all the measuring to properly distance the students, all the emails to parents letting them know what the rules are going to be, like all the planning and decorating are still side issues. We're doing all that because on Wednesday, we're starting school again – God willing. Since we teach preschool through 8<sup>th</sup> grade here at Peace, you can guess what our kids are going to spend the year doing – math and science and reading and spelling and social studies and so on. But you know what? You could get that anywhere. Maybe we'd do a better job. Certainly, we have some advantages in terms of class size and approach to discipline. But every school in Michigan will offer those subjects. This is Peace Lutheran Church. We operate Peace Lutheran School and Peace Lutheran Preschool. That means that our goal today and on Wednesday and every week this year is **more than just math**. And it's more than just reading or spelling or science or social studies. **Christian Education prepares students to face the storms of life.**

The account in our gospel lesson is about a real storm that the disciples of Jesus faced. Last week, we heard how Jesus fed the 5,000. When he was done, he sent the disciples back across the Sea of Galilee by boat while he dismissed the crowd. Then, Jesus took some time to pray. When evening came, Jesus was praying, but the disciples were in the boat, struggling against a strong head wind. A storm had come up on the Sea of Galilee. It lasted until the fourth watch of the night, which ended about 6 am. So they must have been fighting that wind most of the night when Jesus did one of his most famous miracles: he walked on the water out to the boat.

The disciples were terrified when they saw him. Why? After all, by this time, they had seen Jesus do so many miracles. But they were in a storm at sea in an open rowboat. They were probably already pretty worked up emotionally. And to see a human figure walking on the surface of the water – well, they lived in a superstitious culture and their minds made a leap: it was a ghost coming toward them. Of course, it wasn't. And Jesus didn't go out there to scare them. He went out there to reinforce the lesson he had been teaching them since day one: he was the Son of God, the promised Savior. So as soon as they cried out in fear, Jesus said, **"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."**

Jesus knew how easy it is for us to see what God is doing and not understand – in fact, to react with terror and silly, human ideas. And he knew the only thing that truly conquers our fears: himself. "It is I." Jesus sandwiched that simple statement between "Take courage" and "Don't be afraid." It's easy to tell someone not

to be afraid. But it takes more than just words to give them courage. You and I can only conquer fear when we know that Jesus is with us.

That is an essential goal of Christian Education. Today, we will install a new teacher. That rite reminds us that teachers in a Lutheran school are more than just professionals. Their job is far greater than preparing our kids to succeed academically in high school and then in college. And I'm not talking about social skills or emotional intelligence, although we do ask our teachers to help with that, too. We call our teachers into the ministry – better the Holy Spirit calls our teachers into the holy ministry – because their first and greatest job is to build the faith of the children we entrust to them.

The disciples on the Sea of Galilee, rowing into a headwind, fearing that the boat might be swamped, and then seeing what they thought was a ghost walking on the water, all remind us that the children we send to Peace Lutheran School and Preschool live in a scary world. For the last six months, their lives have been turned upside down. I would not be surprised if many of them have felt confusion and anxiety because of all that has happened. I would not be surprised if some of them are uneasy about coming back to school because they know it's going to be different this year. Guess who's going to be on the frontline of dealing with their questions and fears? Right after mom and dad will come the teachers who will spend day after day with them in the classroom, who will organize their day to minimize exposure to germs, who will help the little ones with their masks and remind the older ones to put theirs on. And certainly, our teachers will do their best to explain germs and diseases in a way that helps the kids understand without sending them into a panic. But do you know what their greatest weapon will be? The gospel. The love of God in Christ. That is what will calm the nerves of our kids. That is what will enable all of us to trust in God and deal with life as it comes in this new COVID world.

Day after day, our teachers will point our children to Jesus. They will help our children hear their Savior say, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." And the power of God will be in those words. God will work in the hearts of our kids and he will make them stand, no matter how crazy this year or this life becomes. Because in truth, we won't just be dealing with this year. School is about preparing our children for life. And as important as academics and socialization and emotional growth are, the key to life in a sinful world is faith. It's knowing and trusting in Jesus. You parents have chosen to send your children to Peace because you know how important that faith is.

That faith grows. When Jesus approached the boat, Peter said, "**Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.**" Why did he say that? If it was a test – "prove that it's really you" – it wasn't very well thought out. After all, if Jesus had been a ghost and had told Peter to come, what would've happened? Peter would've drowned and what would he have learned? This was Peter's way of expressing trust in Jesus. He was really asking Jesus to extend his miracle and let Peter walk on the water with the Lord. And Jesus said simply, "**Come!**" and Peter got out of the boat and walked on water.

Now, this wasn't a parable. It wasn't a vision or a dream. This really happened. But there is a lesson for us in this miracle: Jesus has all power over life and death. In the midst of the most terrible storms, God's people can be confident. God's people can conquer fear, not because we're so great or even because we're so trusting or so faithful, but because our Savior is on the job. The Son of God who was willing to take on human flesh is always watching over us. No matter how terrible the storms seem to be, Jesus will always be there to protect us and bring us home to heaven.

Peter knew that, at least at first. And the church exists to help us to know that, too. God called me here to be your pastor so that I can point you to Jesus who will get you through all the storms of your life. And God called all of our teachers to point our children to that same Savior. If our children learn that lesson well, being at Peace will be well spent, even if turns out that our math and English and science programs were second rate. Don't misunderstand me. I think we can do both well, and I know our teachers do, too. But in the end, what is more important? Preparing our children for high school or preparing them for life? Giving them the tools to get good grades or giving them the faith to cling to Jesus when the storms howl around them? Faith was Jesus' priority. And here at Peace, it is ours, as well.

Sadly, Peter's faith failed him. He got out of that boat full of confidence. But what does Matthew say? "**When he saw the wind, he was afraid.**" As his faith failed him, he began to sink. Now, Peter had the best pastor, the best teacher, that anyone will ever have: Jesus himself. Still his faith failed him. What does that teach us about ourselves? Whether you're a pastor or a teacher or a parent or a student or any other member, you are still a sinner. So am I. If our faith were perfect, we would never be afraid of anything. We would never

sink down, never become depressed, never wrestle with any of the hard things of this life. We would simply trust in our Lord and even when life hurt, we would still have the joy of knowing God's love.

But our faith isn't perfect. Yet it is growing, and God brings the storms in part to help our faith to grow. In truth, it's not surprising that Peter began to sink. The shocking thing is that he walked on the water at all. But that his faith would fail him, that's the human condition. It's what I face every day, and you do, too. In the hard things of life, doubt comes. When we lose people we love, when we suffer pain and sickness, when we lose our jobs, when we're dying, we sinners doubt. But did you see what Peter did when he began to sink? He cried out, "**Lord, save me!**" Now, that's not as good as simply trusting in Jesus and walking on the water. But when he was in trouble, Peter knew who to turn to. And that experience of Jesus rescuing him ultimately grew his faith. So it is with us. So it should be with our children. We want our kids to go into life knowing that Jesus is with them, that he will never leave them or forsake them. We want them to walk on water. But when their faith comes up short, we want them to remember Peter's prayer: "Lord, save me!" We want them to know who alone can do that.

Like Peter, they may hear a little rebuke: "**You of little faith, why did you doubt?**" We sometimes echo those words to ourselves. But Jesus would rather have us cry to him for help than despair. And he would have us remember what happened when Peter did cry out: Jesus saved him. He brought him into the boat and the storm instantly stopped. The disciples were awestruck and worshipped him. That's growth. Even when our faith is not all that it should be, our Savior stands there, ready to rescue us. That is the lesson every child in our school needs to know. Every time they learn it, they will grow in faith.

How can our teachers grow their faith? There's only one way: by pointing them to Jesus. Years from now, when the storms come, those teachers might not get to be there. So when life isn't scary, their job is to point our children to their Savior so that their faith is strong when they need it. So, every day, our children will study the word with their teachers. We call it "Christlight." And every day, our teachers will ask our children to look into the mirror of the law, and see themselves for what they really are: sinners, who deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment. But they will never stop there. Always, they will then point them to Jesus, who rescued them from all their sin, Jesus who came and stood in their place, Jesus who was born in a stable and died on a cross and rose from the dead, Jesus who paid all they owe. And our teachers will tell them again and again and again that they are forgiven. They are loved. They will live with Jesus forever.

And then they will tell those precious children to trust in their Savior. He knows what storms are coming. And he can still walk on water. He can enable them to walk on water, too. Jesus loves them. And he will catch them when they slip and calm the waters around them. Jesus will stand with them when the waters rage and bring them home to heaven. There is no greater lesson we can give those kids than the love of Jesus. By the grace of God, we will give them that gift every day throughout the coming school year. Amen.