

## SMALL BEGINNINGS AND OPEN ENDINGS

Matthew 14:22-33

In 2006, Ron Howard breathed screen life into Dan Brown's literary Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, in *The DaVinci Code*. Long story short, Langdon is being chased by a bunch of bad guys while chasing the Holy Grail, the cup which Jesus presumably used to celebrate his last supper with his disciples. In the end—spoiler alert—the Holy Grail turns out to not a be cup but a person, a direct descendant of Jesus passed down through Mary Magdalene. Her name in the movie is Sophie, Wisdom. She is supposedly the carrier of the royal bloodline going back all the way to King David. She learns about her identity in an ancient church, *Rossllyn Chapel*, which is surrounded by a beautiful garden with a pond. As Sophie and Langdon exchange a glance, she dips her toe into the water,

looks over her shoulder, smiles, and says, with a twinkle in her eye, “Nope!”

We pick up the story in our gospel text today after the “feeding of large crowds. ”After all have eaten their fill, Jesus loads his disciples into a boat and sends them across the lake toward Gennesaret. He himself takes off in the evening to go to the mountains in order to pray. Alone. In the meantime, while Jesus enjoys his well-earned downtime in the mountain breeze, a storm whips up on the lake and the boat of the disciples takes quite a beating. Which doesn’t seem to concern him too much. We also don’t read anything about the disciples being afraid and fearing for their lives. Maybe the storm wasn’t all that bad after all. But then, for whatever reason, Jesus decides to take action and starts walking toward them across the sea early in the morning.

Maybe the disciples were occupied by trying to hang on to the side of the boat so as to not being swept into the sea. Maybe they couldn’t really see all that far because it was still somewhat dark.

Whatever the reason might have been, they did not quite recognize Jesus right away. They could only make out a silhouette, a dark figure. And that, not the threat of drowning in the middle of the lake, terrified them. “It’s a ghost!” they cry out in fear. But Jesus speaks the words to them he had spoken before, “Take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid!” In that moment, Peter, always the first to make a stupid comment, challenges Jesus: “If it’s really you, then make me get out of this boat and walk to you on the water.” Daring, to say the least.

I imagine a similar exchange, a similar look, between Jesus and Peter as we see on the screen between Sophie and Professor Langdon. Jesus accepts Peter’s challenge to make him get out of the boat during a storm, dip his toe into the churning water, and walk toward Jesus. “Come!” he simply commands Peter.

However, unlike Sophie, Peter does more than merely dip his toe into the lake—he actually starts walking on the water toward Jesus. Until he doesn’t.

When Peter notices that the storm is still raging, he takes his eyes off Jesus and he begins to sink. We know the end of the story. Peter cries for Jesus to save him, which Jesus does. But rather than getting a pat on the shoulder for walking on water—“Well done, Peter, that was a great first effort, well done,”—he earns a reprimand from his Rabbi. “Could have done better, Peter, if you had only put your heart into it.” Ouch!

I don't think, however, that Jesus was scolding Peter for not “believing enough.” I think this is more like an encounter between a parent and her stumbling toddler who is just about to learn how to walk. The child wobbles, takes a few tenuous steps, thinks “Cool, I can actually do this,” gets excited and tries to take another step and another and ... falls flat on his butt. As the child starts crying his mother picks him up, looks at him, smiles, and says, “Hey Johnny, try again!” And again. And again.

I also do not think that this is a story about having “little faith.” After all, how can “faith” be quantified? We often speak about

people, or hear others speak about people with strong faith, or about people who still need to grow in faith, or about people who have lost their faith. As if “faith” were an object that can be manipulated, that can be grown or can be diminished. Such classifications of faith never made any sense to me personally. If faith is “gift,” as Paul asserts, then quantifying our efforts at “faith” has to be futile.

And I don't think this is a story about physical miracles only God can pull off. After all, both Jesus and Peter walk on water. Only Jesus walks a little further. Which means that “walking on water” is a thoroughly human act, not necessarily a divine one. Rather, I think this is a story about the possibility of the impossible, about the power of the human spirit that can transcend boundaries and achieve, with God's help, more than it ever dreamed of. This is a story about small beginnings and wide-open endings. About taking first steps on water, something that seems at first utterly impossible.

Like a child who is about to learn how to walk, we are often challenged in our lives “to get out of the boat and walk on water.” To leave our comfort zones of home or job or country, among other things. It is like an Abrahamic moment, when God calls Abe and Sarah in their old age to give up family, friends and retirement, and walk into the unknown ... with God. Or like Jesus calling Peter to walk on water. We cannot expect to succeed right away without facing obstacles. We are often in the dark about our lives and about the life of the world, just like the disciples who were quivering in their little boat at the break of dawn. And the shadows of things coming toward us in the twilight are often downright frightening.

History is replete with examples of this. Like Jackie Robinson, being called to play in an all-white baseball league in the 1940s. Like Albert Einstein, an unremarkable Swiss patent clerk who revolutionized physics. Like many who are gathered here in this sanctuary, who came from humble backgrounds and became

doctors, lawyers, and successful businesspeople. Like all the little girls who are currently watching the Women's Soccer World Cup, dreaming of playing for their national team in the future. Like so many unnamed people who are known only to God and who live faithfully each day, making a difference in this world. Like Peter, all of us are people of small beginnings, living lives with wide-open endings and making the impossible possible.

To do this, to "walk on water" isn't really all that difficult. As Saint Francis of Assisi once said: "Start by doing what is necessary. Then do what is possible. And suddenly, you are doing the impossible."

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 13, 2023