

“Take Heart”

Mark 6: 45 – 56

Makemie Presbyterian Church

June 14, 2009

⁴⁵Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat & go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, & he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. ⁴⁹But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost & cried out; ⁵⁰for they all saw him & were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them & said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ⁵¹Then he got into the boat with them & the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵²for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. ⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret & moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵& rushed about that whole region & began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, & begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; & all who touched it were healed.

Earlier this week, I was sitting at the computer in the office, typing away, when I heard someone come in. This isn't unusual. It isn't a case of "ut oh, the jig is up." It happens all the time. You know our church office is right across the street from the courthouse & people drop in on me to discuss spiritual matters, or to ask me questions about Bible passages, or to open their hearts & tell me all their troubles, or sometimes to ask directions to the courthouse, which is an easy one for me. This time it was three young men, who are filming a documentary about paranormal visits & legends in Snow Hill. They were charming. I confessed to knowing nothing about their subject & said, "I've never seen a ghost." They pretty much insisted I was mistaken, that I have in fact seen a ghost & probably more than one, but I just didn't recognize the apparition. I don't know, but I don't think so. But legends about ghosts, well since the beginning of storytelling, the undead have been haunting our tales.

In our text this morning, the disciples see Jesus coming across the sea, without a boat, or water skis, or big floats strapped to his feet, and they determine it must be a ghost. Now it's hard to tell exactly what happened that dark, windy night. Mark's account is one of three different versions in the Bible. Luke skips the story of Jesus walking on the water altogether, while John offers the Cliff Notes version: the sea was rough, the

disciples were scared, Jesus spoke, & before they could haul him aboard, the boat arrived at the far shore. No ghost, no ceasing of the wind, no astonishment.

I would guess that Matthew's account is the best known & it's the one the children presented to us in worship three summers ago as part of summer Sunday school. Matthew's is the one with Peter's brave but failed attempt to meet Jesus out on the waves, followed by Jesus' quick rebuke – "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" -- after which the wind dropped & the disciples did too. One by one they fall to their knees in the bottom of the boat & there among the dried bait & tangled nets, confess their faith, "Truly" they said, "you are the Son of God" (Matt 14: 28 – 33).

But Mark is not so kind to the disciples, or to us the listeners. His account of Jesus walk across the water is a more disturbing one, full of puzzling details that come to a gloomy end. Jesus makes the disciples get into the boat after the feeding of the five thousand, Mark tells us, which means they push off from the shore close to dark. But who sails at night who doesn't have to? Then he tells us that they are headed to the other side, to Bethsaida, which poses another problem, since Bethsaida is not on the other side at all but far to the north.

Then comes the wind, so strong that the disciples row in place half the night before Jesus comes to them – but not really to them, as it turns out. He means to pass them by (did you notice that line in the story?) but they mistake him for a ghost & yell out loud with fright, which gets his attention. So he stops to reassure them, climbs into the boat with them & the wind stops just like that, for which they don't even say thank you because they are too astounded. They know who he is, you see, but they still do not know who he is.

Now for me, this is not a satisfying story. I want the disciples of my Savior to be brave & strong & totally with it, you know, really smart. But according to Mark, they just didn't get it. They didn't recognize that their rabbi was also the Messiah they had been waiting for & it wasn't very satisfying for Mark either. The only explanation he could think of was that their hearts were hardened – their minds were closed – so that they didn't understand the miracle of the loaves or much of anything else for that matter.

Maybe this explains why they weren't glad to see Jesus. Never mind for a moment that he meant to pass them by – they didn't know that, so why weren't they overjoyed to see him? Why didn't they welcome being rescued from the storm & help him into the boat with loud sounds of relief?

Well, maybe it wasn't the storm they were afraid of. The rowing may have been raising some blisters on their hands, but they were not afraid of anything, as far as we can tell. According to Mark, they didn't feel or say anything at all until they saw a figure approaching them across the water – on top of the water – at which point they were terrified and cried out.

They were, fine until they saw a ghost. It probably would have been fine with them to row all night to get where they were going. They were not schoolteachers or poets, after all – they were fishermen, most of them, blue collar workers who were used to hard labor. They didn't mind pitting themselves against the elements, gutting it out, doing whatever it took to get the job done. As disciples went, they were high achievers. They could be counted on to produce, at least as long as no one messed with them. So the storm was not the problem, Jesus was, and he continued to be, even after he soothed them, & identified himself, & made the wind stop. When he did that, his disciples were utterly astounded – not by the waves, mind you, but by the calm. They didn't understand, Mark says, because their hearts were hardened.

When I lived in Florida, there were summers between college semesters, when I would go out fishing on the Rising Sun, a long lining boat to make some money. Fishermen are some of the nicest people you'll

ever want to meet, but who are also some of the most – well you could call them superstitious or you could just say how respectful they are of what can happen to you in a boat on the sea in the middle of the night. Now when Jesus came to the disciples it was the fourth watch or the watch just before dawn, when all the funny stuff seems to happen. Everyone is asleep & it's just you out there surrounded by black water as far as you can see – especially if there is no moon -- & your eyes start to play tricks on you. You stare at the waves long enough & you begin to think you see land or worse. You see rocks rising up in front of you, or phantom ships drifting with all their lights off, or sea monsters.

“Pretty soon the waves start sounding like people whispering, or like the breath of some huge invisible being. Then it comes to you just how alone you are, and how far from home, and how many ways there are for you to die. But you can't think about that too long or you'll go crazy, so you make a peanut butter sandwich, or see how many hymns you can whistle, or polish the compass until the sun comes up.”

Or in the words of Mark's gospel, you row & row & row. You stay busy. You stay focused on the far shore, on your destination, & dismiss everything that gets in your way.

The disciples hearts were hardened, Mark says. Their hearts that part of them most capable of feeling, of understanding, or encountering God was clogged up so that very little could get through to them anymore. Their hearts were all but shut down & they didn't even know it.

Maybe it was the stress: all that hard work, hammering away at the parables, preaching repentance, anointing the sick, casting out demons, trying to put something – anything into those damp hands stretched out for food, for health, for love. Or maybe it was their diet: eating on the run wherever their work carried them, moving from place to place, roast lamb one night & a few dried fish the next. Or maybe it was God, casting a shadow over their hearts for God's own inscrutable reasons.

Whatever the reason, they had heart conditions. They were handicapped, & they used what they had to survive as best they could, to try harder, to row & to row & row. It was what they were called to do, & they were prepared to do it all night if necessary. What they were not prepared to do was see their Lord hiking toward them across the Sea of Galilee – unsummoned, traveling in a most unorthodox manner in the middle of the night. It didn't fit their expectations; it violated all their categories. He couldn't have surprised them more if he had come to them as an arthritic old man with sour breath, or a smooth-talking sales-woman with an alligator

briefcase, or an obviously disturbed stranger asking directions around town.

He just wasn't supposed to be there, & so they couldn't see him. They saw a ghost instead, which was all they could see with what was left of their hearts. Intent on their duties, on guard against all the things that go bump in the night, they mistook their Lord for a spook, for someone who meant to do them harm, but he didn't hold it against them. He may have meant to pass them by, but when in their fear they cried out, immediately he stopped to comfort them.

"Take heart" he said, he who had such a surplus of heart to offer. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And the wind ceased & they were utterly astounded, for they didn't understand about the loaves or the wind or anything. Their hearts were hardened, but he got into the boat with them anyway. Their hearts made it difficult for them to accept him so he accepted them instead.

After that, things got easier right away. There was no more wind, no rowing, just some easy paddling, which gave them lots of time to talk & rub their sore muscles & laugh about what an unusual day it had been all the way around. I don't know if their hearts got any softer, then or ever.

According to Mark, Jesus had harsh words for his disciples, at least twice more, berating them for their stubbornness, for their dullness, for having eyes that did not see & ears that did not hear, but none of that ever seem to interrupt his love for them.

They remained his chosen people, closed hearts & all & he remained their Lord – not only Lord of the sea but also the Lord of the land & of the whole creation – who keeps climbing into our boats to be with us over & over again from that day forth forevermore, with heart enough to spare, oh with heart enough for the disciples and heart enough for us all.