

Stepping out: Matthew 14:22-33

Matthew's story of Jesus walking on the water with Peter can spawn bad theologies.

by [Amy B. Hunter](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

I had a classmate at an evangelical Christian college who repeatedly defined faith as “stepping out of airplanes, knowing that God will catch you.” My response was that surely God had better things to do than catch folks stupid enough to step out of airplanes.

Matthew's story of Jesus walking on the water with Peter can spawn bad theologies. Peter's escapade can become evidence that God asks us to demonstrate faith by taking pointless risks. Or Jesus' reproof, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” can lead to belief that if our faith is only strong enough, no harm will befall us. Setting the bar that high for faith can result in feeling afraid to admit our fears and doubts to others, ourselves and God. Further, when bad things happen—and they will—we may believe that our lack of faith caused this harm or that God isn't powerful enough or compassionate enough to protect us.

When my son Sean was a toddler, we often took him to the playground. He began to step off the wooden climbing structures—and into thin air. Experience had taught him that someone was always there to catch him whether he fell down the stairs or jumped off the bed. Thankfully, he gave up this practice of stepping into thin air, not because he suffered any harm, but very likely because he tired of hearing his mother shriek, “You're going to kill yourself!” My college classmate overstated the case: God does not call us to stop thinking or to risk our lives and welfare pointlessly. But my classmate may have seen something of what my son Sean demonstrated: a sense of safety so deep that we can be, for a time, beyond anxiety.

After hours of being afraid, Peter recognizes Jesus and moves, for a moment, beyond anxiety. When he knows that it is actually Jesus coming to him, walking on the water, Peter dares Jesus to dare Peter to join him on the water. Peter steps out of the boat for Jesus.

Peter's growing awareness of the wind and the waves reminds me of the cartoon of the coyote chasing the roadrunner off the cliff. The roadrunner always makes it across the gap, but every time the coyote, halfway across, becomes aware that there is nothing beneath his feet, he stops cold, then plummets down. Or I remember when each of my sons, while learning to walk, would make unsteady headway across the floor until he suddenly realized that nothing was holding him up and he would collapse in a heap.

Jesus asks, "Why did you doubt?" and I want to jump in to defend Peter. "Hello! Lord! Waves and wind! Not to mention that it simply isn't possible to walk on water!" To be afraid and to doubt in the face of danger is human. If God's demand of us is not to fear and not to doubt, then we are asked to do a task far more impossible than Peter's steps on the sea.

But perhaps Jesus speaks as a friend. Perhaps he knows and accepts Peter's limitations and what he is saying is, "You were doing it! You had it! Don't lose that!" Faith is never settled once for all. I grasp God, or more accurately, for a moment I realize that God grasps me, and then I lose that knowledge. I never get to check off "have faith" on my list of accomplishments.

Peter's relationship with Jesus lets him step out of the boat and, just as important, lets him call for help when he is sinking. Jesus' love for his disciples sends him walking out into the storm to find them in the first place. His relationship with Peter lets him invite Peter out onto the water, lets him chide Peter for wavering in his trust and, most important, lets him take hold of Peter with a compassionate hand.

Many times I feel as if I'm on my own in my boat after Jesus has sent me ahead to cross the sea while he stays behind to tie up a few loose ends. There have been days and weeks when I've felt as if I were steering my boat against the wind and the waves. And many times I have known the presence of God, as unlooked for and frightening as a ghost, coming to me as I struggle. As I search for the words for a sermon or a poem, as I raise teenagers, or as I respond to a crisis in my parish, I feel Jesus' invitation to step out of my boat, to leave behind the safe and the practical in order to toddle toward him. I have felt the cool of the water under the soles of my feet. Many times as well I have known the moments of realizing that the task is impossible and I am too limited to carry it out. And I have felt the many ways Jesus reaches out his hand to catch me—in the love of family and friends, the sustenance of spiritual practice, the bonds of community and the moments of unexplainable

peace in the midst of the struggle and the failure.

God does not demand that I step out of airplanes. Nor am I likely to have trust as pure as my son's when he knew hands were always ready to catch him. But, like Peter, I can step forward, even if the ground beneath me is no more substantial than water. What matters is that I am walking toward Jesus, whose hand is held toward me, stretched out in invitation, stretched out to grasp me should I fall.