

"Galilee Ghost Story"

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²²Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the lake], while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:22-33)

Before I went to seminary, when I was still a lawyer, I was working late one night at the office. My law firm in Wilmington, NC was housed in two historic homes. My department occupied the smaller of the two, the "Pink House" as we called it. And there were those who believed that the Pink House was – I will choose my words carefully -- occupied by a spiritual presence of some kind. I never saw any proof of that with my own eyes, but my partner across the hall did claim that, one night when his family was sheltering in the house during a hurricane, they did see a shadowy figure by the window.

But on that night, as I was working into the late evening, all alone in the Pink House, I definitely felt something weird. In that moment, the Dictaphone machine right next to the computer I was using switched on. Bear in mind I never used that machine. Even then, those machines were pretty outdated technology. But out of the blue, without me touching it, the machine just switched on, lit up, and started humming. I figured it was an electrical surge. It was an old house with old wiring. I switched it off and went on working.

About a minute later, it switched on again. Without me touching it. Again. And that got my attention. I never saw a figure. I did not hear another sound. But I did decide, very quickly, that it was time to call it a night.

The author Margaret Atwood once said, "Everyone who tells a ghost story starts by saying it's true, but I want to know if it's really true." And this brings us to another ghost story, one that took shape out of the Sea of Galilee. At Jesus' direction, the disciples had set out in a boat in the early morning darkness, and, as often happens on that big lake, a windstorm popped up out of nowhere. When cool air from nearby mountains rushes down and hits the humid air and warm water of the lake, violent downdrafts and wind funnels can whip up battering waves with little or no warning. Anyone who has ever been in a storm like that knows that the winds can often sound like wailing, howling, moaning. And then, out over the waves, they catch sight of a form walking towards them over the water. It



was not a logical thing to be seeing, and in their fear they conclude that it must be some kind of spirit or phantasm.

The destination for that voyage probably contributed to the conclusion that they were in the midst of a Galilean ghost story. At this stage in the ministry of Jesus, the disciples have been crisscrossing the lake, going back and forth between the safer, more familiar side on the west and the alien and less predictable side on the east. And the last time they had gone over there, things had gotten really creepy and weird. That's when they met a possessed man who lived in chains in an old cemetery. No wonder they were seeing ghosts out on the water.

Truth be told, they didn't really know what they were seeing. The Greek word translated here as "ghost" is "*phantasma*," which is obviously derivative of our English word phantasm. So "ghost" or "spirit" does fit. But the primary meaning of phantasm is not a spook or specter. A "phantasm" is, most literally, "a product of the imagination" ... a "visual image that seems real but only exists in a person's mind or perception." In other words, a phantasm may not be real. Our mind and senses may be playing a trick on us, or we might just be reading more into a strange situation than really exists. Mentally and emotionally, we might just be taking something simple and making it scary. Kind of like a Dictaphone suddenly coming to life in a dark, old house. Is it real, or a product of the imagination?

So when they saw a shadowy figure on the lake, they were not sure what they were seeing. Was the person real, or a product of the imagination? In this moment of terror, only Peter is able to see through the fog. Even when they hear a familiar voice saying "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid*," they still don't recognize what is happening. Only Peter, who is known for some admittedly great moments but also some spectacularly bad ones, begins to recognize that it might actually be Jesus.

But even he isn't sure. "*Lord, if it [really] is you*," he says, "*command me to come to you on the water*." Hearing the simple reply, "*Come*," Peter takes an extraordinary step for someone in the midst of a ghost story. He steps out onto the waves. Initially, his faith sustains him, but the wind and waves and doubts quickly become too much. But even in that fear, it is clear he has recognized Jesus. There is no one else that he would call "Lord," so his plea is both passionate and personal. "*Lord, save me!*"

In the end, the episode is a mixed bag for Peter. He steps out of the boat, but fear almost immediately gets the better of him and he starts to sink. By comparison, however, he deserves some real credit. Where the other disciples failed to recognize Jesus, Peter at least thought he might be recognizing him. Where the other disciples had little faith, Peter at least had a little more... enough for him to step out onto the water.

Even if we cannot know how the disciples felt in the midst of this Galilean ghost story, we can relate to the challenge of faith that they all faced. We come here, week after week, and we listen to the stories and we sing the songs and we pray the prayers. But when the world gets scary, and things get weird, are we really convinced that Christ is with us in the storm? And even if we do believe he is present, do we really believe he has the power to rescue us... to save us from real and present danger? It all comes down to how we really view Jesus. Is he real... or a product of our imagination? Is he our true Savior, or just a phantasm? When it comes to this, most of us are in the same boat facing the same question: "*O you of little faith, why do you doubt?*"

For a while, one of the most familiar names in the Presbyterian Church was Clifton Kirkpatrick. For much of my ministry, he was the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.). A few years before he died, he recalled an ecumenical gathering he once attended that was led by an even more famous Presbyterian: the Reverend Ernest Campbell, who was raised in Morningside Heights and later returned to the old neighborhood to lead the well-known Riverside Church. Kirkpatrick remembers that Campbell was preaching powerfully about the crisis of faith in the church. There was one comment in Campbell's sermon that Kirkpatrick never forgot. "The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time," Campbell preached, "is that we are not doing anything that requires it."¹

In other words, the reason we don't have faith is that we are not using our faith or stretching our faith. We are not putting our faith to the test by stepping out of places of safety, stepping out of our little boats and out into the challenges of the world. The more contemporary preacher Will Willimon sees it this way: "Don't you find it strange that Peter was uncertain that the voice from the waves was [really] the voice of Jesus until... that voice commanded him, 'Come on out, the water's fine'?" Even as he was stepping out, Peter was still unsure that Jesus was there.

But doing that, Willimon claims, is the only way we will ever really know Jesus. "That is Jesus," he says, "the one who extravagantly, recklessly, commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of." If Peter had never overcome that uncertainty to heed the call, he would have missed the powerful encounter of recognizing Jesus in the storm... and missed the great opportunity to be rescued by Jesus.

"I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows," Willimon continues. "The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea... you have to prove his promises [by] trusting his promises, through risk and venture."²

There is a key moment in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie when Kiera Knightly's character recognizes for the first time that the Black Pearl is a haunted ship manned by a crew of skeletons. As Captain Barbosa steps into the moonlight and reveals his ghastly nature, he warns her ominously. "You best start believing in ghost stories, Miss Turner. You're in one."

While our situation is neither dark nor ominous, this story of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee is our story, too. It tells us that we best start believing in ghost stories, too, because we are in one. Ours is not a story of condemnation, but one of rescue. It is not a story of demons, but one of angels. But it does present us with a very basic challenge of faith and discipleship. For you, here and now, is Christ real to you... or just a phantom in the mist?

Amen.

¹ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), p. 334.

² https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025fe/how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus