

“Keep your Eye on Jesus”

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A little over a year ago, my grandson Ethan was learning to walk. We would coax him to try and take his first step. Urging him on, as we held out our arms and encouraged him to muster up the courage to take a step on his own. At first, he was too scared and afraid. He would attempt to take a step, but would wobble, and lose his concentration and fall to the ground. With persistence, we would try to encouraged him, get him to focus on Mommy, with her arms stretched out, just beyond his reach, and before you know it, one step turned into two, as Mommy backed up a little more, just beyond his reach. Ethan focused hard on his mommy, not losing hope that he would soon be in his mommy's arms, and not realizing, his fear of falling, but focusing on reaching his mom. Two steps, turned into three, four, and before you know it, he was a walker. This is a familiar story to many. The secret to Ethan's success was overcoming doubt and fear, and focusing, not taking his eyes off his mommy.

In the story here in this fourteenth chapter of Matthew, there was one besides Jesus who walked on the water - or tried to - Simon Peter. Peter saw Jesus coming toward their boat and he got all excited about that. In his excitement, he said: I want to walk on the water too. So he called out to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but, as the story is told, "When he saw the wind, he was afraid." Beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" As Jesus stretched out his hand to Peter, he said to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"

It's only when Peter takes his eyes off Jesus that he begins to sink. That's how being a follower of Jesus is. As long as we are focused on our faith we're all right. When we focus on our fears and our doubts, that's when we are in trouble. That's when we sink, and that's when we fall down. Well, Peter doubted, I suspect, because he took his eyes off Jesus and began to look at the waves and the wind. In these lives of ours, yours and mine, there will sometimes be much to fill us with fear and with doubt - unless we can look past the immediate circumstance and get into focus on something beyond.

The very fact that Peter even attempted to do the impossible, to walk on water, is crazy. He had to step out in tremendous faith. There will be times when we will be called to step out as well. It may be to teach a Sunday school class, to welcome a new family into the church, to visit a shut-in, to stand here in this pulpit and give a sermon. There are a multitude of possible steps that we might be called to take. The main thing of course, is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. There are times when the waves beat us in our hour of need. He calls us to step out in faith, trusting Him. If we keep our eyes fixed on Him,

He will not let us down.

We must not give up on living just because the storm is around us and the wind is in our face. We must go on living even when the going gets tough. If one has made up his mind to do everything possible to avoid thorns, then under no circumstances would he ever try to gather roses. We find beauty at the risk of feeling pain. I love to pick raspberries, and it never fails that the best berries are always deeper in the middle of the berry patch. So I must risk the thorns to reap the fruit.

Imagine a mountain top view. The beauty of God's creation for miles to see, as you gaze across the horizon. Climbing to the top of the mountain can be hard, exhausting, painful, but your efforts are rewarded as you reach the peak and stare out at God's beauty as it prevails before you. We find this beauty at the risk of feeling aches and pains.

We must learn the art of walking on water. We can, and many people have. I have known some of these people, so have you-people who have had more than enough trouble to undo them, but they haven't been undone-people who have come through enough of a storm to take anyone down, but yet they stay on top. Thank God for those who seem to walk through life on lighter feet. They move through situation and circumstance with a certain optimistic hopefulness, a mood which seems to say that today is not the end, that "the best is yet to be." Let us call it a spirit of buoyancy. These people have a unique facility for staying on top of whatever they come upon. They seem to walk up to any situation carrying a victory with them as they come.

I think of my brother Mark. He had a dream, a vision to build an accessible garden and trail for those who could no longer make the trek into the woods, or bend over to put their hands in soil. He had no land to do this, he had no money to do this. He only had a dream, a hope, a vision. He approached the community center to get permission to do this, so he acquired a wonderful space, right next to a wooded area. But, he had no budget, no equipment available to him. I know if it were me, I would have given up my dream long before this. Many in the community must have thought this impossible, even a bit crazy to pull off. Mark, however was very focused, not listening to doubts, fears, naysayers, but having faith that everything would work out OK. People came to help from all over the community, businesses made donations, friends were there with bulldozers to move the earth, and to help develop the blueprints of this trail. But as many of you know, flowers don't grow by themselves, weeds do however. How on earth would this grandiose trail ever be developed, and maintained. You see, God was there, Jesus was there, to help pull it all together. The Trail of Hope was sent the Week of Hope, a group of young mission workers with lots of energy and a willingness to fulfill God's work. I am marveled at the fact that this beautiful piece of landscape can be maintained without any outside financial aid. Many, many people have made donations, from bricks to dying flowers and trees that needed a little TLC for resurrection. Keep your eyes upon Jesus, keep your faith strong, keep focused during the storm.

Even closer to home, in our own little church we are set upon a project that would seem to be too big for this little church. We have a beautiful historic organ, in need of repairs. With the help and vision and dream of the folks in our church that would like to see this organ maintained and repaired there is a group of people who formed the organ committee. Many would say that this is too costly for our small church to undertake. But as we keep our eyes on Jesus and keep our faith strong, we continue to strive towards our goal. We cannot let doubt creep in, keep focused, keep our eyes upon Jesus, keep focused during the storm.

How can a dream/vision dissipate that once seemed to be God's will for a church? People take their eyes, just for a second, off of Jesus. They listen to their fears, rather than their faith. They are more conscious of the opposition than the opportunity God has given them to do something wonderful. Keep your eyes upon Jesus. That is the secret of doing great things.

This is also the secret of a fulfilling life. Focus on your faith not your fears. Fears, doubts and negativity are a lower energy. Faith, love and the focus of Christ Jesus is an aspiring uplifting energy. No matter how fierce the storm, ignore the wind and waves and listen to the voice of the Master. That is the secret of a fulfilling life. When the storms are raging keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

On the seas where you and I must sail, there are many contrary winds that blow, many storms that rage, many perils that threaten. Life is like this. It comes equipped with a built-in element of struggle, and not to accept this is to reject the very character of life itself.

Last week I saw an inspiring story on Facebook. A professor was giving her students a pop-up quiz. I don't know about you, but when I was a student, my stomach would churn into butterflies whenever I heard the teacher say, pull out your pencils we are having a pop-up quiz today. Anyway, the teacher passed out the test, face down on the students' desks. Then she instructed the students to turn the papers over. On the other side of the paper there was a black dot in the center of the paper. The professor asked to the students to write what they saw. The students, were all a bit puzzled and confused at the request of the teacher. They all began to write, describing a black dot in the center of the paper. The teacher collected all the papers, and began to read the responses aloud. All mentioned the black dot, in the middle of the paper. Not one student ever mentioned the white paper. The teacher then went on to say that they would not be graded for the test, but she said that this is how we often look at life. You see we often focus on the black dot which represents everything that is going wrong in our life, our health issues, lack of money, complicated relationships, unfulfilling jobs. Now take your eyes off of the black dot in your life, and focus on the white paper which represents all of our blessings in life. Focus on love, joy, happiness, our blessings, focus on Jesus. The dark spots are very small compared to the joys and blessings in our life. We need to turn our focus from the dark spots to our blessings.

Peter was OK as long as he kept his eye on Jesus. Peter did take a few steps on the water, but then fear crept in and he began to sink. Jesus said he lacked faith. Faith is what you walk on when whatever you are walking on isn't enough to hold you up. Faith is the foundation of life. If you don't want to sink walk on faith. If you don't want your life to fall apart like a house built upon sand, build your life on faith. Faith in the word of God. As you learn to focus on Christ and to keep moving forward into the face of your fears, fear becomes less of a problem. Why? Because you learn to trust your heavenly Father.

As Jesus approached them that night, that boat-load of disciples believed they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus reassured them: "It is I; do not be afraid." Once in preparation for a program in which he was to take part, a small boy memorized this brief saying of Jesus: "It is I; do not be afraid." The time having arrived for him to say his little speech, the boy stood on the big platform before the assembled audience - and he was utterly petrified. Hesitating, and his fear mounting with every passing moment, he was unable to remember what he was supposed to say. Finally out came this: "It's me; and I'm, scared to death!"

Well, something went wrong, didn't it? Obviously, standing there alone in the presence of all those people, the little boy was totally taken over by what he conceived to be his own predicament. He was consumed by it, and utterly paralyzed. Had he kept focus on what he was supposed to do, he would have been all right. But he got to thinking of himself and where he was, the situation he was in, and he couldn't be aware of anything beyond that. A similar thing often goes wrong with us. Failing to hear Jesus as he says, "It is I," our awareness turns in another direction, and we say, "It's me." At many of life's turnings, if we cannot hear Jesus saying, "It is I; do not be afraid," we are very likely to say, "It's me, and I'm scared to death." And about the time we say this we begin to sink.

Look at the waves, and you're a goner; but look to the Lord, and salvation is there. The story is told of a small boy who was playing in the family yard when he discovered a house-painter's ladder leaning against the house. Of course, like any small boy would do, this little fellow began to climb, rung by rung, higher and higher. A little later, the painter, working at the top, glanced downward and saw the child more than half way up, the small face gleefully upturned toward him. He knew instantly that if the little fellow ever looked down he would be terrified, and would probably panic and fall from the ladder. So, with calm and cheerful voice, he spoke to the child: "Keep climbing, son," he said, "Look up here to me and keep coming." As the child climbed, the man kept talking, urging him upward, holding his attention. Then, as the child reached the man, having never realized how high above the ground he was, the man took him in his arms and carried him down the ladder to safety again. Many of us often make the same mistake Peter did - we look too much at winds and waves, and we become afraid, and they pull us down.

There is another story about a six-year old boy who was tossing and batting a ball in the

front yard when his father came home. "Hi, Dad," he shouted, "Watch me! I'm hitting 'em a mile!" As his dad watched, his son tossed the ball, took a swing at it, and missed. "Strike one!" he shouted gleefully, "But just watch this one, Dad." Again he tossed the ball, took a poke at it, and missed. "Strike two!" he intoned. "But it takes only one to hit it," he said, "and I'm really going to clock this one!" Carefully he took his stance, carefully he tossed the ball, mightily he swung the bat - and missed. "Strike three," he announced, "and out." he added. Then, exultantly he shouted, "Gee Dad, am I a pitcher!"

Well, there's victory built into a little guy like that. If he cannot win on one side, he will on another. He may sometimes experience defeat, but he will always be a winner. The undertow may pull at his feet, but he'll stay on top.

The word "circumstance" is one well-filled with meaning for our life. "Stance" means to stand and "circum" means around. Circumstance is that which stands around us. In all our living, we are always in the presence of circumstances, sometimes pleasant, easy, and agreeable - and sometimes not so. Often we hear the phrase "under the circumstances." These words frequently precede some sort of excuse for not doing some thing which we know we really ought to do: "I wanted to help you, but I was busy, and so, under the circumstances, I couldn't do it."

The circumstances are there - all about us, always. The question is this: are we under them or on top of them? Do they engulf us, imprison us, shackle us, enslave us? Or are we above them? Usually we do not create them; many times we cannot change them; but we can refuse to be engulfed by them.

We, too, can be water-walkers, buoyed and borne up. For, after all, it is the victorious Christ who calls to us across the stormy sea saying, "Come, saying, "Come unto me. "He stands triumphant; he has proved himself in storm.

And across the winds that blow and the storms that rage, if we listen, we can hear his voice speaking still: "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." And, across the winds that blow and the storms that rage, if we listen, we can hear him say, "Come ... come unto me." And, you know, my friend, if we but keep our eye on him, I think we can do it.