

Amazing Things At Sea!

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me again to Matthew chapter 14. Matthew chapter 14.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. So much of the writings of the Gospels seem so very ordinary. Ordinary in the sense that we can relate to it and imagine ourselves to be right there.

But there are also many times when what we read is very far from ordinary. So far away from it that we can hardly imagine ourselves to be there at all. The events in this passage in Matthew 14 fall into both categories.

There are ordinary things like fighting against the headwind and having so very little faith. These are things to which we can relate because these are things we experience almost every day in one form or another.

[1 : 13] But there are also extraordinary things like Jesus walking in the water. Like Jesus calling his disciples to do the same.

I guess none of us have ever seen anyone walking on the water. When God provides us with a new building, what we're calling a new fishing boat from which to fish for the souls of Glasgow's peoples, much that will happen will be very ordinary indeed.

Setting up chairs, corralling our children, hoovering, vacuuming for my American friends, vacuuming the floor. But there may also be times, many times, when what will happen will be very far from ordinary.

The gospel of Jesus Christ shall be proclaimed and people will be changed. Exhausted sinners will find grace in word, prayer, and in the sacraments.

It shall be at times as though Jesus is walking on the water toward us and calling us to walk on the water to him. We'll come back to that main theme in a moment because it will form the major part of our study this morning.

[2 : 34] But I want to take a moment or two to remind you of something that is exactly the same between what happened that night on the Sea of Galilee and what is happening today, right now.

Jesus is praying for his disciples. Our passage begins with Jesus going up on a mountainside to pray. And among the many things he prayed for were his disciples.

He's watching them struggling against a headwind far down below him on the sea. And he's praying for them. Early last month, I spent three weeks studying the writings of the 17th century Glasgow Puritan minister, James Durham.

And in particular, his doctrine, his presentation of the doctrine of the heavenly intercession of Christ. Now, these are big words, but in essence, they mean this.

From where Jesus is, at the right hand of God, the Father in heaven, right now, he is praying for us. From where Jesus is, he is praying for us.

[3 : 41] Just as he was praying for those disciples on that boat, on the Sea of Galilee, so he is praying for us today. We're going to come back to this later in the year as we examine what this doctrine means, but I want you to be reassured, all of you, Jesus is praying for you.

That all the benefits he died to secure for you would be poured out upon you in grace. Now, today I've entitled this sermon, Not Everything, Not Everything, for reasons that will come clear.

But this is absolutely the same between then and now. Jesus prays for us.

As I say, we'll come back to that amazing truth later in the year. Back to our passage. I've entitled it, Not Everything. I've done so because it's natural for all of us, is it not, to be apprehensive about moving from this magnificent building to another building we do not know where or when yet.

Especially as we grow older, we like things to stay the same. We don't like changes. We don't like disruptions. It is really quite natural to be apprehensive. Yes, even anxious.

[5 : 04] And we want to ask the question, what will be the same about how we do church in our new home? To which the answer is, not everything.

And we want to ask the question, what will be different about how we do church in our new home? To which the answer will also be, not everything.

The truth is, as it was for the disciples on this rough evening in Matthew 14, 22, 33, the next few months are going to require us to flex our spiritual muscles and learn how to depend upon Jesus and his grace in new and exciting ways.

Well, from this passage this morning, I want us to see three things about what will be the same and what will be different about how we do church in our new home. First, not everything will be sweetness.

Second, not everything will be standard. Third, not everything will be safe. First of all, not everything will be sweetness.

[6 : 19] Not everything will be sweetness. Our passage begins with Jesus in prayer on a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee. At the same time, the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee on a boat, but it's tough going.

In verse 24, we read, the boat was now in the middle of the sea tossed by the waves for the wind was contrary. I love that expression. The wind was contrary.

It was against them and they've been fighting against it all night. By this time, it's the fourth watch of the night corresponding between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m.

in the morning. You can imagine the frustration of the disciples as they're trying to tack their sails. They ain't getting nowhere. They're straining at the oars, but they're going only backwards because the wind is contrary.

They must have been sweaty and short-tempered and exhausted. You're a reporter. You stick a microphone right in front of Peter's face and you say to him, how do you feel right now, Peter?

[7 : 23] You'd probably have to blank out quite a few of his words. Because the truth for them is that not everything about that was sweetness. They were obeying Jesus' command.

After all, according to verse 22, it was Jesus who had made them get into a boat and go across before him to the other side of the lake. They were obeying Jesus' command, but not everything was sweetness.

The pietistic nonsense which suggests that the path of obedience to Jesus is the path of least resistance is just that.

Pietistic nonsense. Sometimes, often even, the path of obedience to Jesus is not sweet, but involves frustration, sweat, perseverance.

For some, Rutherford, it involved being exiled from his home in the south of Scotland away to Aberdeen in the northeast. For many persecuted Christians today, the path of obedience to Jesus means torture and death.

[8 : 36] Not everything about obeying the call of Jesus is going to be sweetness. Listen carefully. Not everything about moving to a new church home will be sweetness. The wind will often be contrary and we'll find ourselves frustrated, short-tempered, and exhausted.

There will be many times as if we feel as if we're getting nowhere and in fact, we're working uber hard just to go backwards in our mission. Imagine our first week there, whatever the there will be. For the vast majority of us, we will not know how much work was put into all the financing and monetary side of the move.

We'll never know it. We'll never know how many false starts the property group are having to endure right now. We will never know how difficult it was to move all our accumulated stuff here in St. Vincent Street to our new building.

We will never know how much mental, physical, and spiritual energy went into making our new fishing boat watertight, useful for the work of mission. And then over the course of the first few months in our new home, we'll have so many teething issues to deal with.

[9 : 55] Internet connections dropping, broken toilets, stained carpets, people leaving because they can't easily park in the city center, people joining who are difficult and needy.

We're going to settle into a new normal where, if truth be told, not everything will be sweetness. There will still be disagreements about what songs we should be singing, what we should be

teaching our children, and how we should be doing our evangelism.

And then it'll come to the first church clean. Okay? You'll pick up your slip at the back of the church, telling you what your job is, and you'll find that your job is to clean the gent's toilet.

And you'll be thinking to yourself as you're polishing the urinals in the gent's toilet, oh man, I thought that moving into a new boat was going to be exciting. You sold me a lemon, you promised me a new fishing boat, but these toilets are just as smelly and disgusting as the old ones.

Now the reason I'm saying these things to you is not that I don't want, it's because I don't want any of us to have naive expectations. Consider the game of rugby. Think of how hard the forwards work.

[11:09] These huge men with huge muscles, they're either pushing at the scrum, running after an opposition back, or trying to support a ruck. These are the men who do what are called the hard yards.

They are the men who most often make all the difference between a team winning and a team losing. Their names don't feature on the lights. These are the guys that make the hard yards and create the openings for the backs to score.

And what I'm saying is that life in our new building will often be making the hard yards of grunting, of sweating, of pushing, and of chasing.

Be prepared for it. Be prepared for the mode of the same old as we've experienced for the last 50 years here in this magnificent building and as every healthy gospel church experiences.

I wish I could promise you that a group of wee fairies would come in at night to clean our new building, but it won't happen. I wish I could promise you that every decision the leadership team makes will not be controversial, but it won't happen.

[12:21] I wish I could promise that there will never be conflict in our new home, but it's not going to happen. Not everything will be really all that different. I'm saying these things to you because the church does need its skilled, fast backs, but far more it's going to need its solid, hard-working forwards whose only job it is to grunt and sweat and push and chase.

Who sometimes to go forward will have to go back. And sometimes they're going to have to sit on their haunches to get their breath back. Just like I'm sure these disciples did that night.

And what will make it all the more frustrating is that Jesus seems to be nowhere. Oh, he's up in the mountain praying while we're in the boat struggling. If he was here, we wouldn't need to struggle at all. No, not true at all.

Obedience to Jesus' command demands our grunting, our sweating, our pushing, and our chasing. This is the way it's always been. This is the way it always will be.

What we forget, as I said earlier, Jesus is praying for us when we're stuck in that sweaty and dirty scrum. And he'll give us the strength to keep pushing.

[13:48] And grace to endure until he comes to us. Not everything will be sweetness. Not everything, second, will be standard.

Standard. Not everything will be standard. There's going to be plenty of times where everything seems so ordinary, so mundane, and so usual. But there will be times where they are punctuated by occasions where everything seems extraordinary.

ordinary, otherworldly, unusual. Now, these disciples are making heavy weather of their crossing.

It's between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., and they're exhausted. But the last thing they ever would have expected happened right there. Verse 25, we read, in the fourth watch of the night he came to them walking on the sea.

Now, the disciples were no less rational than we are, and so they concluded that they were seeing a ghost. After all, as fishermen, they knew that water wasn't dense enough to support the weight of a man, or to put it more starkly, if you try to walk on water, you sink like a stone.

[15:05] So they thought they were seeing a ghost. They're terrified. No less, I'm sure, would we have been if we'd have been in their situation. But to them, from the water itself, Jesus cries out, take heart.

It is I. Do not be afraid. Words so powerful, so loving, we examined them a few months ago in the context of anxiety. The central statement is, it is I, in verse 25.

It is I. A statement which you will know in the original Greek language is the one with which you'll be familiar, ego ami, I am, the biblical name of God.

In other words, the man walking on the water to them is the God of heaven and earth, the God of their fathers, the God of Israel, the God who controls the wind and the waves, their God. In the

context of Matthew's gospel, this is the most amazing element of the story.

Not that a man walked on water. No big deal, that. It is that God himself has come down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

[16:12] Won't bother trying to diss the miracle. The greatest miracle of all is the incarnation of God himself. But in our context today, the point is this, not everything will be standard.

Our ordinary, mundane, unusual routines of church life, morning, evening worship, prayer meeting, and so on, will from time to time be punctuated by occasion when God comes close to us and we feel transported to another realm.

Think of it this way. You have rushed out of the house to get to the church on Sunday morning and you're tired because your little kids kept you awake all last night and now they're playing up in the car.

You struggle to find a parking space. You get into church five minutes late, all flustered. You shrug a sigh of relief when it's time for the kids to go to the Sunday school and crash.

And you settle down for a bit and your pulse stops racing and your blood pressure falls. Everything is just ordinary, an ordinary Sunday in Glasgow City Free Church.

[17:27] Suddenly, during the reading of the word, something changes. You can't put your finger on it, you just know something's different. God is speaking to you through his word.

Through the remainder of the sermon, you are stuck to your seat as if every word spoken relates into your situation and no one else's.

It's as if no one else is in church that day. Just you and Christ. And you have that sensation that something's very far from standard, ordinary, and usual.

The living God by his Holy Spirit is, as it were, walking on the water toward you, confronting you with who he is, and the power of the gospel he carries with him.

He is speaking to you. Whose preaching doesn't matter a whit. Who you're sitting beside doesn't matter a whit. The clock stops ticking.

[18:36] And for those sacred moments, you are transported into heaven's throne room to hear the loving voice of your heavenly Father. conversions are going to happen when God miraculously opens the eyes of the blind and makes the lame walk.

Sins will be exposed and there'll be times of deep repentance and earnest prayer. Men and women will be called to give their lives in service to Christ. There will be new visions of his glory and love.

Times of sacramental fellowship around the Lord's table and at the baptismal font. times of such closeness and intimacy with each other. And all because the ego amy, the I am, God becoming flesh or God, the God who has become flesh will walk across the waters to us and the hairs in the back of our necks will stick up with just how extraordinary it all is.

Trust me, not everything is going to be standard. Sometimes it's going to be amazing. And then third and last, not everything will be safe.

Not everything will be safe. When I say that not everything will be safe about our new building, I don't want to give you the impression that there will be problems with our electrical sockets or our plumbing or our security as there perhaps is about this building.

[20:14] What I mean is that there will be times when Jesus calls to us to get out of our boats and walk in the water to him. Times when he calls us to leave our comfort zones and to follow him into a life of risk and faith.

Having seen Jesus walking in the water, Peter says to him, very remarkable really verse 28, Lord if it's you, command me to come to you on the water. Now of course Peter is the bad press apostle, we want to talk of his three denials of Jesus on the night of his betrayal, but we conveniently forget that Peter was the first out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus.

Remember, as we'd say, the wind was blowing a hoolie, the sea is rough, but even if it wasn't, honest question, would you have got out of the boat and walked to Jesus on water?

In all honesty, what Peter did that day wasn't bad press, but something quite astonishing. Many years ago, the American pastor and author John Ortberg wrote a book called, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*.

By all accounts, it's an excellent book, but let's never minimize what Peter did that day. The talk of him leaving his comfort zone minimizes what he did that day. He did something really risky, something very unsafe.

[21 : 40] He walked on the water knowing fine well. One slip and he's going to drive it. Let's not minimize Peter's faith in this passage. I see a lot of Peter in myself, but not enough of this.

Most of us are far too risk-averse rather than boldly getting out of the boat and walking to Jesus. We talk about leaving our comfort zones, but it's far more than that, is it not?

I leave my comfort zone when I try and push weights in my garage. Peter risked his life to walk with Jesus. That's what's going to happen when God speaks to us in our new building.

He's going to call some of us into full-time ministry or onto the mission field. He's going to call others of us to the radical heart of mission in the workplace or at home.

He's going to call the rest of us to be counter-cultural, to go across and against the foe of today's greedy, selfish, and pleasure-seeking society.

[22 : 53] Okay, think of Peter that day. What about half a mile, I suppose, half a click from the River Clyde? Would you try walking the River Clyde? More than that, would you walk in a stormy River Clyde?

Would you even try? Are there any here who are willing to leave the safety of the British equivalent of the American dream to preach the gospel to a needy world?

You know, people think of churches as places of safety and security, and to some extent they are. We're deeply thankful and privileged to have Vernon as our safeguarding officer, making sure that we're safe from all kinds of abusive threats and behavior within the church.

Listen carefully to me. We have no safeguarding officer from God. We have no safeguarding officer from the God who will call us to walk on the water to him.

Things very far from ordinary and very far from safe will happen as God speaks to us in our new home. What I find amazing about this passage isn't just that Peter had the faith to get out of the boat, but that he didn't immediately sink.

[24 : 10] That's what I didn't have expected to happen, that he'd sink like a stone to the bottom of the sea and he would drown. It's okay for Jesus to walk in the water, after all he's the son of God, but what about Peter?

Well he doesn't sink and that's an amazing thing. I wondered what these first few strides on the water felt like. What did those first few strides on the water feel like?

I'm sure nothing like he'd ever experienced before or he'd ever experienced after. The water under his feet supporting his weight. He's doing something extraordinary, something unsafe, something none of us should try, boys and girls at home, a definite one-off.

And as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he stayed afloat. But the moment he began to look at the storm, the moment he began to feel the wind, the moment he began to hear the waves, he began to sink.

Now we commonly misinterpret this passage just to suggest a what kept Peter on top of the water was his faith. That as long as Peter had enough faith, he could stay walking in the water.

[25 : 26] No, what kept Peter walking on the top of the water was the power of the Jesus in whom he had faith. It was Jesus who was holding Peter up. It was only when Peter took his eyes away from the power of Jesus that he began to sink.

And there's a lesson here for us, especially with regard to what we can and cannot do as Christians. When we look at the world around us, I know I'm like this, we're tempted toward despair, cynicism, circling the wagons, and risk aversion.

I've seen it far too many times not to notice it. So sometimes in our presbytery perhaps you'll hear an old man saying this guy will have seen it all, he'll have done it all, and he'll say to a young minister, just don't bother with trying to reach out with the gospel in this place.

Just don't bother trying. It's hard to the gospel in this place. We tried it before in this place. It didn't work then in that place, and it wouldn't work now in that place.

the problem is that this old man has been looking at the storm and feeling its wind and hearing its waves, and he says, don't bother getting out of the boat, just hunker down, be reasonable.

[26 : 50] But then there are other old men who have spent their lives trusting Jesus, even though they've been out of the boat and sunk more times than they care to mention, says to that young minister, you keep your eyes fixed on the sovereign power of Jesus Christ to open blind eyes and change dead hearts.

There's an old man who's been looking at the power of Jesus his whole life through, and trusting in the power of Jesus his whole life through, and he's holding that young friend of his by his hand,

encouraging him to have faith, and then the two of them get out of the boat together and walk on the water to Jesus.

Make no mistake at all, our prayer isn't for our new building to be a place of safety from God, but a place where the power of God draws us to take calculated risks for him.

To do the distinctly illogical and irrational, even the most radical of all risks, that we'll open up our hearts to Jesus, and we'll invite him in to be our savior and our Lord, that we'll leave our comfort zones of worldly pleasure and security and say to Jesus, call me to come to you, lead me by your hand, let your gracious power uphold me in all you call me to do for you, because by your grace I want to live a life less ordinary.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we have spent four Lord's Day mornings now from your word discussing what it will and will not mean for us to have a new fishing boat from which to fish for the souls of Glasgow's peoples.

[28 : 57] Lord, our desires are all out on the table before you. You see them all. You know them all. There's nothing hidden from you here. Our great desire is to see Glasgow flourish by the preaching of your word and the praising of your name.

And so, Lord, will you not open the door that these great plans which you have given us may become a reality.

that we may hear your voice in times ordinary and extraordinary calling us to deeper faith in Christ, to more radical faith in Christ, and a life of service to him.

In Jesus' name, Amen.