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Have you ever had a day when you just wanted to get away from everything? Find some time just for yourself, away from the to-do list, the noise of family members, the tasks at work, the bills to be paid. Just a little break from the routines of life; a space to be quiet.

I imagine that's what Jesus was trying to find when he decided to go off by himself for a while after crossing the Sea of Galilee. Earlier that day he had learned that his cousin, John the Baptizer, had been killed. Matthew's Gospel tells us that "After Jesus heard about John, he crossed Lake Galilee to go to some place where he could be alone." Ever need a quiet space to sort out your turmoil? To struggle through your feelings? Those quiet times don't seem to last very long, do they? Even for Jesus, the time seemed too short, for Matthew tells us that the crowds found out where Jesus was and followed him out of town to that quiet place. He had compassion on them and began listening to their problems, offering them healing and hope until into the evening when his disciples said, "It's getting

late, Jesus, and we're out in the middle of nowhere. Send everyone home to eat."

Jesus replied, "They don't need to go home; just give them something to eat."

Right. Where would they get food for a crowd? The local McDonalds that didn't yet exist? The nonexistence KFC? That wasn't a very practical suggestion, but they managed to scrape up five loaves of bread and two fish, which amazingly seemed to multiply after Jesus blessed the food. Through God's amazing way to multiply our limited resources and the miracle of the crowd sharing the food, everyone had enough to eat, and soon everyone went home with their stomachs filled.

"Let's try this alone-time again," Jesus may have thought as he sent his disciples back across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while he sought a quiet place to pray. After losing John to death and healing and feeding crowd members, Jesus was ready for his overdue time of quiet reflection and prayer.

While the disciples were on the lake that evening, the sky grew darker, the storm clouds

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began to surround the boat. The Sea of Galilee is known for the sudden squalls that can occur, storms that can form quickly as the cold winds from the west or the mountains to the north channel through a gorge, creating a tempest when mixed with the warm air over the water. Although the lake is only about 3 miles wide and 3½ miles long, the narrator tells us that the disciples were still on the lake early the next morning. They had been out in the lake in the storm all night. Imagine the fatigue and fear that filled their minds and hearts.

The next morning Jesus came to them, walking on the water, telling them to not be afraid. You would think that after experiencing Jesus feeding a large crowd with a limited food supply that they would have a deeper trust in him, but instead they were terrified at what they saw. Jesus reassured them to not be afraid, and here's where I wish the Bible had a way to convey the intonation of Peter's reply. Did Peter mutter, "*If it's you, Lord, command me to come to you on the water,*" expressing his doubt that Jesus was really there? Or did the

intonation depict a sense of fear, a desperate cry for help: "If it's you, Lord, command me-to-come-to-you-on-the-water."

Jesus offered a one-word imperative reply. Did his reply with the word *come* have a reassuring and inviting tone? (*come here*) Or did the word carry an impatient, it-really-is-me tone? **(COME ON)**

The writer doesn't provide all the details in this story. We're left wondering...but maybe that's part of the purpose—to get us to feel the emotions, the incompleteness of the story, for life doesn't always come in complete packages, perfectly tied together. Often, we find ourselves struggling with our faith.

Before we have much time to ponder this brief conversation between Jesus and Peter, we find Peter jumping out of the boat, walking across the water. The story suddenly shifts when Peter notices the wind blowing. He becomes frightened as he has a moment of sinking faith and cries out "Save me!" Jesus reached out and caught Peter's hand, exclaiming, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

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This story reminds me of the times I've experienced sinking faith, the times I have doubted—those times when life seems to go sideways, when unpredictable events startle me, when faith seems to sink as I try to step into stormy waters. Doubt is a normal part of life, an uncertainty that stretches and challenges our faith and helps it to grow. Doubt is like exercise—it's good for us, but most of us don't like to do it, for it can be painful and uncomfortable.

When those times of doubt impact our lives, it may feel as though life is sinking, as was the case with a castaway on an island.

A lone shipwreck survivor on an uninhabited island managed to build a crude hut in which he placed all that he had saved from his sinking ship. He prayed to God for deliverance, and anxiously watched the horizon each day to hail any passing ship. One day he was horrified to find his hut in flames. All that he had was gone. To the man's limited vision, it was the worst that could happen, and he [yelled at] God. Yet the very next day a ship arrived. "We saw your smoke signal!" the captain told him.¹

Even in the most desperate of times, when we feel as though our hut is burning and our faith is sinking, God continues to offer us new possibilities. It's possible that even through the sinking times that we learn something as we struggle. One writer made this observation as he wrote about a sinking ship:

There are parts of a ship, which left to themselves, would sink. The engine, the shafts, the steel girders, all taken out of the ship would settle to the bottom of the sea. But when those heavy steel parts are built into the frame of the ship, the vessel floats. In comparison, the loss of a loved one...the pain and disease you are called upon to bear...the waywardness of one of your children...the failure you experienced in business...such sorrows and adversities taken singly would sink us; but when fitted into the framework of life, they keep us afloat!²

The writer suggested we are tea-bag Christians, for a tea bag gains its flavor through hot water. It's through the hot water struggles that we endure that we add flavor to our faith.

I would also suggest that like pieces of a boat would sink on their own, one's faith on its own

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could sink, but fit together in the boat of faith we call *church*, together we find a way to keep afloat. How many times, when you feel your life is sinking, have you found comfort and hope in this place? How many times when you've struggled with doubt has someone here offered you an encouraging word? How many times has this church held onto you to keep you from fully sinking?

Think about when Matthew wrote this story about Peter sinking—decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. This story may tell us something about life in the early church—a church filled with fear and doubt, people wondering: *What happened to Jesus? When will he return?* I imagine those in the early church felt tossed about by the storms of life, a church that may have felt as though it was sinking.

We may even have those moments in our own church, when we feel as though we are sinking in a

culture that no longer seems to value what we're teaching. When surrounding messages tell us to ignore the cries of those around us, to build walls to separate those who are different, to sort and value people by the color of their skin or gender or lifestyle, we continue to navigate in dangerous waters as we welcome everyone into our boat of our church.

When the culture around us says to supersize everything to give it more value, we may lament that our church is no longer as large as it used to be. Some may say the church is sinking, and yet, Jesus had only twelve close disciples and look how they changed the world.

When you feel as though the church or your faith is sinking, remember what Jesus said to Peter as he tried to do the impossible and walk on water: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3750-3754). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #720.

² Paul W. Brubaker, "Tea-Bag Christians," March/April 1982, www.brewitness.org/tea-bag-christians