

Come With Me On A Great Adventure!

Joshua 24:1,13-15

Romans 10:5-13

Matthew 14:22-34

August 13, 2023

Celebrate South Highland Sunday

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On this Sunday of celebration and new beginnings, what," what we now call – "Celebrate South Highland Day, "we used to call "Rally Day" we think about what lies at the heart of this great church. I think of a moment Rowan Williams, formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury described. Years ago, he was visiting an Orthodox monastery in Greece, and was taken to see one of the smaller, older chapels.

"It was a place intensely full of the memory and reality of prayer... The monk showing me around pulled the curtain in front of the sanctuary, and inside was a plain altar and one simple picture of Jesus, darkened and rather undistinguished. But for some reason at that moment it was as if the veil of the temple was torn in two: I saw as I had never seen the simple fact of Jesus at the heart of all our words and worship, behind the curtain of our anxieties and our theories, our struggles and our suspicion. Simply there; nothing anyone can do about it, there he is as he has promised to be 'til the world's end. Nothing of value happens in the Church that does not start from seeing him simply there in our midst, suffering and transforming our human disaster."ⁱ

I think today of the generations who preceded us here at South Highland, and how He has been with us, and them, from generation to generation. I read the names of pastors and leaders on these sanctuary walls, four General Assembly moderators, a leading Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice who was a Ruling Elder here, a pastor who died right after preaching a sermon on Isaiah 64:6 "we all fade like a leaf." I think of those who served and those who died in the Second World War, of people who gave these pews, this pulpit and table and font, the All Saints Tower Bell, and of those we remember more personally who left us more recently, Bob and Carolyn Hunter, Keith and Maxine Williams.

I think of children who fill these halls with joyous laughter Sundays and throughout the week, and older folks here Monday through Friday, their Alzheimer's disease a little better to bear for the love and community they find here. I think of youth filling vans going to Montreat, Great Escape, and mission trips to Memphis.

All this happens in and through and because of this Church, and at the heart of it all – Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, our laughing, loving Savior, our risen, ruling, reigning Lord Jesus. And not Jesus alone, but Jesus in community, eternally active, moving, vibrant community, relating together and relating with us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name we are all baptized.

I think of all this and more when I think of this great church, and of you who make it up, you who are the Church called South Highland. Today, after summer's more relaxed renewing

pace, we “Rally”, we gather, we unite again for the next season ahead. For me – the final semester. And we see afresh the welcoming face of Jesus, we see him with arms wide open and extended through the window in our library reception area. We see him through the cross high above amid these towering oak arches, the cross of victory, an empty cross now, a cross on which once he hung as he offered the supreme sacrifice of his life for ours and won the empty cross of victory over sin, death, and hell. The cross of life. “I came that you may have life – full and abundant life,” he said.

As our reading from Matthew 14 begins Jesus has entered a period of delayed prayer finally, he has time, space, and solitude to grieve privately in prayer on the mountain over the death of his cousin John. Remember King Herod, in a drunken lustful rage at a big banquet of debauchery had ordered John’s head cut off and presented on a platter.

But this prayer of grief was delayed because when Jesus went toward the mountain, the crowds learned where he was along the northwestern shore of Galilee, and they came to him, they came and they came and they came, 5000 men plus at least as many more women and children. He could not turn them down. He had compassion on them. He cured their sick. He taught them of God throughout the day, and when evening came and they were hungry he fed them, with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Yet all ate and were filled, and there were still 12 baskets full of leftovers. All this before his prayer. Finally, he sends the disciples ahead in the boat to the next village while at last he has time, space, and solitude to go up the mountain by himself and pray.

I

I don’t know about you, but our family takes a lot of photos with our I Phones, and we share them around. Especially since our crew is spread across the country, from Alabama to California to Tennessee to Florida. Particularly over these summer days we have been sharing pictures of our varied summer adventures. Well today let me share with you four photos, four pictures which arise from this story in Matthew. The first is a picture of **Chaos**. The storm at sea and the frightened disciples.

Sent on ahead in the little boat, without Jesus the disciples in the boat encounter turbulence on the water. The wind whips up, the waves slosh in, and they are far from land. It is a terrifying scene, this storm. A scene of chaos, as the forces of evil, ever threatening, almost overwhelm them. And their leader is not with them.

Some years ago, I was part of an interfaith interracial group of pastors, ministers, priests and a rabbi, and we were returning from an incredible journey through the divided three nations of Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, what had formerly been one communist Yugoslavia. All along the journey we were guided by two wonderful young articulate Islamic women, well educated, gracious, (they dressed fashionably, not in burkas), and with their guidance we traveled smoothly without a hitch through these three divided nations. We were studying how religion both unites and divides, and the horrors of the war in Bosnia. And we came back here

to Birmingham and crafted what we called “Ten Principles for Living Together in Community.” Community that transcends our own divisions as Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Well, everything went smoothly overseas- never missing a plane, bus, or appointment- until we got back in the good old USA at O’Hair Airport in Chicago. We were now on our own. We no longer had our guides with us. They got us on the overseas plane from Europe successfully. But here we were, eight bumbling pastors who could not find our way to make our connection to Birmingham. One said, “Take this airport connecting train.” Another said, “No, that one. Another said, “No let’s walk down this corridor”, another said, “No take that one.” Well, we finally got to our gate in Chicago for the last leg home to Birmingham, only to see the gate door slam shut in front of us. We looked out and could see our plane that we would not be on sitting there on the runway. We had lost our leaders and we lost our way. At sea the disciples lost their leader and lost their way. It is a scene of **Chaos**. That’s the first picture.

II

The second picture is one of the **Christ Coming** to them. The picture we see is of a mighty post-resurrection Christ, the Jesus who will conquer death and rise again to rule and reign. Here Jesus comes to them as the Universal Christ. In the boat they are terrified. Yet he says, “Take heart” We say in our Great Thanksgiving Prayer of the Communion, “Lift up your hearts.” That is look up, see deeper and higher and wider, see with faith. “It is I; do not be afraid.” This “It is I” literally translates – “I am.” Remember back to Moses and the burning bush when God YHWH encounters Moses and commands him to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Terrified, feeling inadequate Moses asks what is your name? Who shall I say sent me? And God says “I Am.” Tell them “I am” has sent you.”

Jesus here appears as the mighty Lord, the “I am” ruling over wind and waves, telling the disciples and us we are not at the mercy of the dangerous sea. We are at the mercy of our compassionate Savior. He rules over the wind and waves. He comes to them walking on water, not as some cheap magic trick but as the foretaste of who he really is. He is Lord. He is “I Am.”

Seeing him the disciples are even more terrified! Jesus is coming to them, walking to them on the water! They are terrified, as we would be terrified, taking him to be a ghost, an apparition, something fearful, dangerous, deadly. But he calls to them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” That phrase, get this now, that phrase, “Do not be afraid” is found in the Bible 365 times. 365. That’s a daily reminder from God every day not to fear. Do not live your life in fear but live with and by faith. Because, as Paul tells the Church in Rome,

“The word is near you, on your heart, that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus came to them. That’s the second picture.

III

The third picture is of Peter, the bold up-front impetuous disciple, being **Caught**. He wants to believe this is the Lord and he calls out to the Lord --- “ Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Peter is eager, Peter is yearning for something more, Peter is willing to step out of the little boat onto the open seas at the word of the Lord. And Jesus the Christ says, the great “I am” “Come.”

Friends that is what Jesus is saying to you and me today. You are longing for peace and purpose in life. You are longing for meaning and direction. You want to believe there is more to life than the terrors on the evening news and the chaos in Washington and Moscow and Jerusalem and Beijing. You want to trust that God is real and loves you and cares for you, wants to comfort you and give you courage for – for this new school year, for a new uncertain job, for serving as a new Elder or deacon or Trustee for this new season unfolding at South Highland amid the uncertain seas of leadership changes and capital campaigns. You want to step out of your little boat in faith, but you are afraid. Yet, like Peter, you take a step out, eyes locked on Jesus, and, amazingly, you walk toward him, your eyes on him, you are walking on the water. He has **Caught** you and you coming to him. But then you notice what’s all around you, waves sloshing, winds blowing. You obsess on these and you begin to sink.

Have you ever wondered – why come to church? Why give up a few hours on what may be your only free day to gather here and study the Bible and pray, and share a simple meal of bread and wine and sing songs about God together? Why take time to know the needs of your sisters and brothers in Christ, and pray for them and support them? I suppose there is not a parent among us who has not heard the plea of a child, “Mom, Dad, why do we have to go to church? Older folks remember back, didn’t you whine like that as a child or a youth?

One mom was asked that, as she was driving her children to church. From the backseat came a voice, “Ah mom, why do we have to go to church? It’s boring, the minister does not know when to end the sermon, we have to sit still, we can’t get our clothes messed up, there is more fun stuff to do. Do we have to go?” Bless her, to her credit this mom did not just say, “because I said so,” or even, “yes, church is a have-to, something we have to do to check off the list.” No, she just said, “Because this is who we are. Because we get to do this. It’s an honor, it’s a joy, it’s a privilege, it’s a grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Come to me Peter. Come to me Church. Come by faith, putting fear aside. Come because you have been **Caught**. Peter is **Caught** by the Lord. Saved. Redeemed. Delivered.

Peter exercised faith but an imperfect faith. After all, he alone is the one who steps out of the boat. But he lets his fears get the best of him and begins to sink. The risen, reigning, Christ though, does not turn his back on him, does not leave him to his dreadful fate, sinking down, sinking down. The Lord compassionately reaches out his big strong hand immediately, then and there, and **Caught** him, saying “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And together the Lord leads Peter and us back to the boat.

I was sinking deep in sin Far from the peaceful shore

Very deeply stained within sinking to rise no more.
 But the master of the sea Heard my despairing cry,
 From the waters lifted me, now safe am I
 Love lifted me! Love lifted me! Love lifted even me.
 When nothing else could help, Love lifted me.”^{iv}

The third picture is of being caught.

IV

The fourth picture is one of **Communion**. Immediately as Peter and Jesus step into the boat the wind ceases, the seas calm. The Lord is together with them and chaos turns to communion. Together again, the disciples and the Lord, the storm is passed and there in the calm of their little church in the boat. And they worship him. They don't gossip with him. They don't chat with him about his time on the mountain. They worship him. Here is a scene of quiet sabbath worship.

“O day of rest and gladness, O day of joy and light.
 O balm of care and sadness, Most beautiful, most bright:
 On thee the high and lowly, through ages joined in tune,
 Sing holy, holy, holy, To the great God Triune.”^v

In the boat the Church Worships. And that is what the Risen Christ, the Lord who is with us always invites us to do today and every Lord's Day. To worship and adore him. “O come let us adore Him” Christ the Lord. We only celebrate South Highland because we celebrate Jesus Christ the Lord who is holding us and all things together.

The Church gathers for worship. But then we go out to serve- entering the mission field as we go out through these doors. Jesus and the disciples and we do not stay in the boat but go through us on to Gennesaret, and Vestavia and Pelham and Mountain Brook, where once again Jesus is recognized through us and people come to him and are healed. His ministry and ours continues.

“Aw Mom, why do we have to go to church?” “Because this is who we are. Because we get to do this. It's an honor, it's a joy, it's a privilege, it's a grace.”

Recently I came across this powerful quotation from the theologian Karl Barth, it is one we should revisit again and again.

“One never is a Christian. We do not reach some state of being a Christian, one can only become one again and again: in the evening of each day somewhat ashamed about one's Christianity of the day just over, and in the morning of each new day glad that one may dare to be one all over again, with solace, with one's fellow humanity, with hope,

with everything. The Christian congregation is of one mind in that it consists of real beginners.”^{vi}

So, beginners, let’s begin again! “Choose you this day who you will serve. But for me and my house – we will serve the Lord.” The promise of this day, for us even as the disciples discovered that **night of chaos and that morning of Christ Coming and being Caught and experiencing Communion with him**, with the Triune God we know and trust as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we will step out of our comfort zones in faith not fear, if we will tell ourselves again and again who we are, we are beloved children of God, if we will come to church to be reminded and to share this new baptismal identity with others, we will hear in our own way the voice of the Man who stilled the waters.

Put your hand in the hand of the Man who stilled the waters.

Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea.

Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently Put your hand in the hand of the Man from Galilee.”^{vii}

Amen.

ⁱ Archbishop Rowan Williams, Enthronement Sermon, Feb. 27, 2003. [www.archbishop of Canterbury.org](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org)

ⁱⁱ Romans 10:8-9, 134

ⁱⁱⁱ From a sermon by Dr. Chris Currie, “Again and Again” June 25, 2023, St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church, New Orleans

^{iv} “Love Lifted Me, hymn.

^v The Hymnbook, “O Day of Rest and Gladness”, p.70

^{vi} Chris Currie, *ibid*, quoting Karl Barth

^{vii} “Gene MacLellan, “Put Your Hand in the Hand”, first recorded by Canadian singer Ann Murray