

“Feed Your Faith, Not Your Fear”

August 19th, 2018
Matthew 14: 22-33

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Pastor John Ortberg wrote a book called *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of The Boat*. In it he tells a wonderful story about a ride he and his wife once took in a hot-air balloon. The balloon party consisted of the Ortbergs, the pilot and another couple.

Ortberg had always assumed that the baskets hanging below hot-air balloons were about chest high. No sweat. However, the basket on this particular balloon came up to just a little past their knees. One good lurch would be enough to throw someone over the side.

As they soared into the blue; Ortberg held on with grim determination and white knuckles. His wife was even more afraid than he was. She didn't like heights in the first place, so she crouched with a death grip on the sides of the basket and would not look down at the view for any reason.

Ortberg decided he would like to get to know the kid who was flying the balloon, so he asked him how he got started. He knew they were in trouble when the young man started to speak.

“Dude,” he said, “It's like this . . .” Ortberg discovered the young man had spent most of his time surfing, and got into flying hot-air balloons by accident...Literally! One day he was driving around in his pickup truck after having too much to drink. He crashed his truck, and badly injured his brother. His brother still can't get around too well, the young man said, but he really loves hot-air balloons! “By the way,” the young pilot added, “if things get a little choppy on the way down; don't be surprised. I've never flown this particular balloon before, and I'm not sure how it's going to handle the descent.”

Ortberg's wife looked over at him and said with feeling, “*You mean to tell me we are a thousand feet up in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying hot-air balloons because he got drunk, crashed a pickup, injured his brother, and has never been in this one before and doesn't know how to bring it down?*”

Then the wife of the other man looked at John Ortberg and spoke the only words either of them were to utter throughout the entire flight. “*You're a pastor,*” she said. “*Do something religious!*”

“So,” says Ortberg, “I took up an offering.” (Bad joke!) We assume they returned safely, but Ortberg never mentions how long it took for his wife to start speaking to him again.

In our scripture reading today, following the feeding of the 5,000, our not-so-fearless disciples are out on the sea while Jesus stays behind to pray. Late that night, Jesus comes to them... and they are absolutely terrified. Who can blame them? They're in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, the waves are getting rough, and Jesus comes to them - - *walking on water!* They've seen him do a lot of amazing things but this was *way out there*. They thought they were seeing a ghost. But the part of the story that fascinates me—actually it really is one of my favourite stories in the Bible—is not Jesus walking on water, but that Peter decides to walk on water too.

Jesus says to the disciples: “Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid.” And then Peter says to Jesus: “Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.” What a crazy thing to say! I'd be saying “Lord, if it's really you, get in the boat here with us where it's safe! You're not even wearing a life jacket! Get in here!!”.

But Peter had that child-like faith. I mean that as a compliment. In that moment Peter thinks, (actually he doesn't think, he definitely wasn't thinking — it's more like a strong gut sense) *'If Jesus is out there then that's where I want to be. I want to be with him! Even if where Jesus is, is crazy and scary!'*

Always it's when we step out and take that leap of faith — when we *dare to be with Jesus* — that the miracle happens.

So Peter gets out of the boat. And he really does walk on water! For a while. But then he starts to sink. Why? Because when he was in the boat and told Jesus to tell him to come, he was totally focused on Jesus. He'd have to have been; otherwise he would never have done anything as nutty as that! But once he's out of the boat and the exhilaration wears off, he starts to look around and take stock of his current situation. He takes his eyes off Jesus and focuses on the huge waves and on his own very limited abilities. “What am I thinking?”

He probably started kicking himself for always being so impulsive and stupid, and then he starts to sink. And then he panics, and cries out for help. And immediately Jesus takes his hand and pulls him up.

I believe it is the same for us. As long as we keep focused on Jesus in our life, then we will be OK. It's when we take our attention off him and focus on the many problems that surround us that we will sink. The worst thing we can do in a storm is to let go of our faith. If we let go of our faith,

we will surely sink. However, if we will just hold on to our faith and look for Christ's hand reaching out to us, we can make it through any storm. Always, we need to feed our faith — not our fear.

I can remember a couple of years ago going to an aerial adventure place (like Skywood) in Hilton Head, South Carolina. This is one of these places where there are ropes courses/obstacle courses in the air. You start at a beginner course and move up to intermediate, advanced, and then there is an expert/military grade level that is pretty intense. You do this over about 2 hours and while you get better as you go, you also get more and more tired, so handling the more difficult courses gets harder. I can't quite remember how far we got (intermediate or advanced) but I remember there was a next level that we decided we were too tired to attempt.

I'm glad we stopped. There was another family that went on — and their daughter, who was about 12 or 13, had a total panic attack. She was in tears, and just couldn't, wouldn't, move. The main guide climbed over to her. Everyone is harnessed in and the guide could have lowered her to the ground, but she decided to talk her through the course. She did it in a classic drill sergeant voice: "Look at me!! You look at me! You're going to put that foot right here! No — don't you look down — you look me in the eye!" Meanwhile the kid was a blubbering mess. I wasn't sure this was going to work, but slowly and surely this girl, whimpering "Yes ma'am" managed to complete the course and get back to the base. I'm glad the guide got her through, because though the girl was shaky, she was also clearly proud that she had overcome that obstacle. Had they lowered her to the ground she would have felt like a failure, embarrassed and humiliated by the whole experience.



My daughter, Anna, does the same job at Skywood. She often has to rescue panicked climbers — but she does it in a decidedly more Canadian way. In an up-beat, sing-song voice she'll say: "Ok, you got this bud! You can do it. 😊 You're going to put that foot over here... yup that's right! No,

no, don't look down! Just swing that hand over here. Ya, you got this!" Both tones seem to do the job. I don't know about you, but sometimes I need the voice of the drill sergeant and sometimes I need the encourager more. Either way, the guide gets the climber to focus on them while they give them very specific instructions to get through the course.

Faith and fear are both opposite muscles that you can build. If you focus on worry and fear, then you get good at it. In fact, if you focus on the fear, it can get very difficult to do anything else but fear. Feed your fears and your faith will starve. Feed your faith and your fears will starve.

I don't know what is making you afraid today. Perhaps it's your own illness, or something someone you love is going through. Maybe it's a financial worry that is giving you sleepless nights, or relationship difficulties, an upcoming move or uncertainties about the future. Whatever it is — we need to keep our focus on the One who is going to guide us through the fears and the obstacles. When we do, amazing things happen. Our faith grows and what we can do with that faith becomes limitless.

There is a man in Wayzata, Minnesota, named Bob Fisher. Bob owns a shoe repair shop. In fact, he is known as "Shoe Bob." Bob tells about being invited to go camping in the winter. This was not an appealing idea to Bob. He had struggled since childhood with a phobia that one day he would freeze to death. He hadn't told anyone about his fear, and decided to overcome it. He bought a pup tent and put it up in his backyard in the dead of winter. He was determined to get through the whole night. Remember this was in Minnesota, where a person really could freeze to death in a short time.

"I purchased a pup tent, pitched it in the backyard, and bundled up in the warmest clothes I had," Bob recalls. "My plan was to sleep in the tent for one night without retreating to my house." Bob tried, but sleep eluded him. And each breath he took felt like sucking polar air. He was cold. So he prayed. Bob prayed, remembering words from Philippians that had become his life verse earlier that year in his quest to know Jesus more: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death" (Phil. 3:10). Bob prayed that he could last the whole night outside so he could tell his friends he gave it his best. But while he was tossing and turning trying to stay warm, God spoke to him. "*This is a good idea, sleeping out here,*" He seemed to say. "*Why don't you move the tent to the front yard and sleep outside to help the needy in Wayzata?*"

Bob moved the tent to the front yard. After checking with an outreach association, he decided to use his tent to make his community aware of the needs of the homeless.



He found sponsors who would sponsor his nights in his pup tent with the idea of raising "\$7,000 to buy Thanksgiving dinners for 100 families." After 14 days of sleeping in the bitter cold, Bob received \$10,000 in donations.

So you know what Bob did? He committed to repeating this each year, with a focus on raising funds for housing for the needy. The fundraiser has grown and grown, and there are now partners and various supporters. Different people and organizations host a "Sleepout". The last target I saw was for raising \$2.184 million dollars in their annual campaign. The money helps struggling families with basic needs such as housing and food so they can get back on their feet. This all came about because Bob felt called to overcome his fear.

We can focus on our fear ... or we can focus on our faith. Focusing on our fear will distract us and ultimately cause us to fail. Focusing on our faith will cause us to succeed far beyond our wildest dreams. Keep your eyes upon Jesus.

We reach out and continue to take risks with Refugee sponsorships. We are looking at bringing another family through the BVOR program, where the government partners with a group to bring someone in. We get a glimpse as to who the family is, but we never know their full needs or how much work we will need to do until we meet them face to face. If you are interested in getting involved, keep your eyes out for upcoming information in the Wall Street Wire.

I began my sermon by telling you about Pastor John Ortberg and his ride in a hot-air balloon. In some ways life is like that ride. We only get one ride in this life. I don't know about you, but I would rather spend the ride enjoying it and marvelling at the amazing beauty and adventure. The problem is we don't know what this ride will be like. Will the descent be as

smooth as going up? We also dearly wish the sides in the basket were higher and provided greater security.

Most of all we wonder if we can trust the one who is piloting the balloon. That is the key. I want you to know that if you let Jesus be the pilot of your life, you can trust him wholeheartedly. There will still be bumps on the journey, but you will not be alone. He will guide you through the obstacles and fears.

Jesus is standing in the middle of your fear too. He is calling you to come. He is calling you to trust and to take his hand and to step out of the “safe” little boat you are trapped in. All you have to do is keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your fear, and you will walk on water. Don’t worry. Even if you panic, Jesus is still there and he will keep you from drowning. It is frightening to face your fears, but it is *way more frightening to live in your fears*.

You were created to grow and to really live. You can walk through those walls and be free. You will still feel fear, but it won’t stop you or control you anymore.

Jesus said that he came to proclaim liberty to the captives. You can be set free from your fears. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. If fear is holding you hostage, I invite you to pray in your heart the following prayer:

Lord Jesus, be near to me. You know my fears, my anxiety and my worry. Jesus, stand in my fear and bring light to that dark place. Forgive me that part of me likes this small dark space. I admit part of me is comfortable here, but you are calling me to grow and to step out beyond this space. Free me from the prison of my fears. Open my eyes to see beyond my fears to where you are calling me to make a difference. Set me free to serve you, I pray, in the power of your name. Amen.