

“Getting Out Of The Boat”

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat
and go on ahead to the other side,
while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds,
he went up the mountain by himself to pray.
When evening came, he was there alone,
but by this time the boat, battered by the waves,
was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

And early in the morning
he came walking toward them on the sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea,
they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!”
And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said,
“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you,
command me to come to you on the water.”

He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat,
started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened,
and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him,
saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those in the boat worshiped him, saying,
“Truly you are the Son of God.”

Getting Out Of The Boat

Matthew 14:22-33

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I.

It is with a mix of both sadness and joy that I begin today's sermon by lifting up to you an old and dear friend of *mine*, but also a great many of *you* (whether you knew it or not): Laura O'Shaughnessy. Or, more formally, the Rev. Dr. Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, Dana Professor Emeritus of Government at St. Lawrence University. Laura died on July 23rd at age 81 (you can read Laura's obituary [here](#)). Her memorial service was held last Monday in the town of Lee MA where she made her home after retiring from teaching and moving from Canton, and among her faith family at the Lee Congregational Church. Unfortunately, the service was not live-streamed or I surely would have made people aware of the opportunity to attend virtually as had been my own hope.

II.

Laura was on the search committee which brought me, Linda, and our family to Canton, and she has been a support to us, my ministry, and the work and mission of this church right up until her death. We share a birthday date, November 8th, and each of us is one of those rare Presbyterians with a last name ending in a vowel (she was born Laura Nuzzi). Hence, Laura came honestly by her Mediterranean disposition. I have never known her to be less than *emphatic* about anything. She was certainly very loving and nurturing, but she did not suffer foolishness gladly; either individuals or in the aggregate (which is why she came to be an ordained a UCC minister rather than Presbyterian). Laura was an enormous stone who rippled greatly throughout the pond that is her Government Department, St. Lawrence University, and the Canton Church (and BC, et. al. by extension). I dare say we will never in our lifetimes meet a person who better combined abiding friendship, rigorous scholarship, and genuine faith.

III.

While I have had numerous stories of, and experiences with Laura there are two in particular which I would share with you as they have greatly informed

my understanding of ministry and of life. To know Laura was to understand the great love she shared with her husband, Tom, and the profundity of her loss when Tom died at the age of 60, four months after being diagnosed with from a rare and aggressive form of cancer. I was there with them that beautiful sunny day at a Massachusetts Hospital one month shy of 24 years ago.

While I spoke and prayed with Laura and her family as one might expect from a clergy person in such a context, my greater responsibility was simply holding Laura's infant grand-daughter, Charlotte, while Laura and her daughters, Nancy and Ellen, might grieve and attend to their husband and father. While Charlotte is certainly too young to remember, I will never forget gently singing to her in between the trickle of my own tears for a grandfather she would never know.

IV.

During the ensuing years following Tom's death, Laura taught me an incredibly valuable lesson: for some the grip with which grief holds them can last a lifetime. Moreover, everyone grieves differently, at their own pace, and in their own time. We should never rush people through their mourning, or place on them some kind of expectation as to when they should "get over" their loss. Life simply does not work that way, neither do people.

The other story I would share with you concerns Tom's boat. A 16ft Compact (brand name) sailboat with a cuddy cabin, self-bailing cockpit, and a 4 hp engine. Following Tom's death it sat parked in the side yard of their house on Crary Drive for about 5 years. I had never sailed before, but having a cottage on a lake gave me the ideal opportunity to learn. I expressed to Laura my interest in buying the boat if she ever got to the point of selling.



V.

My understanding is that Tom *really* loved that boat and, almost certainly, what it represented. Given this, I can assume that seeing it go to a friend who would understand its history was an appealing way of getting out of her ownership of the boat. However, I knew that this was a weighty decision for Laura even though so much time had passed since Tom's death, and I don't believe that in all that time it moved an inch. One day Laura let me know she was ready to sell it to me. Born in the Bronx and having grown up in Queens (and she sure spoke like it) Laura was both shrewd and astute in just about any matter that mattered. She proposed a price of \$1,000. While that was a hefty sum for me, I knew it was a fair distance from what it was actually worth. Which made me a little uncomfortable. I never like to trade on, or benefit from my role as a minister.

VI.

I drove over to her house to do the proverbial deal. I told Laura that I was uncomfortable paying her only \$1,000 for the boat. Without missing a beat, she said, "Ok, make it \$1,100." As my mouth gaped a bit she said, "There, does that make you feel any better?" At which point I proceeded to *shut* my mouth, paid her the \$1,100 and, then, drove off with the boat. That, right there, was Laura O'Shaughnessy.

Laura was a person who "got out of the boat." Time and time again in her life, with great courage and no small amount of faith, she got out of the boat and endeavored to walk on whatever water the winds of God and this world had placed before her. All of us here at the church have Laura to thank for the example of leadership she set, certainly for our church but her department and the university as well I am sure, to take heart and not be afraid. I join her family, colleagues, and friends in missing her greatly.

VII.

Today's scripture reading from Matthew chapter 14 takes place immediately on the heels of the feeding of the 5000. Having been thwarted earlier by the crowds which he had spend the day healing, Jesus turns to his own need to be alone and pray, in response to the news they had received that morning of John the Baptist's death at the hands of Herod. So, having fed the crowd and with them fully sated, Jesus finally dismisses the people and, then, sends the

disciples on ahead across the lake without him. Jesus then went up a mountain to be alone. Meanwhile, the disciples who were all in the boat were spending the night far from land way out in the middle of the lake where they were battered by the waves for “the wind was against them.” Then, in the morning just before the dawn, Jesus came walking toward them on the surface of the water.

VIII.

Thinking it a ghost they cried out in fear. Jesus calls to them, “*Have heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” However, even though Peter *sees* Jesus, and *hears* his words of encouragement, Peter is still unsure, still afraid. He makes an incredibly strange request as proof that it is, in fact, Jesus standing out there on the water. He asks not for Jesus to come closer, or come into the boat with them, but for Jesus to command *him* to come out *there* on the water to meet him. So Jesus said “*Come,*” and Peter...Peter, got out of the boat.

Now, there is an awful lot going on in this story. There is the value of spending time alone in thought, prayer, and contemplation which is modeled by Jesus in this tale. There is the fear the disciples experience at seeing the miracle of Jesus walking on water, even though they had just witnessed him feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves/2 fish. And, there is the human tendency, exemplified by Peter, to keep God at a distance.

IX.

What I would like us to focus on, however, is what took place in Peter’s heart in those few moments of faith between asking Jesus to command him to step out of the boat, and Peter actually taking that first step out onto the surface of the water. Too often, we in the church see faith as either an ever-present cornerstone of our lives manufactured over the years which we just assume will always be there, or as something of a fetish or good luck charm which we nervously carry around in our pocket. Something hidden but ready to be pulled out if ever the need arises.

True faith, though, is really only ever a miracle of the moment in which it is called for and mustered. Afterward, it is often gone again without warning. Though there may not be many such miracles out there, I have found there usually is one with our name on it. However, it typically takes a lot of hard

work, both over the long-haul and at *just* the right moment, in order for us to see and experience it.

X.

Now, I am happy to report that each of you, in coming here to church today, have made a good start for the long-haul. You have recognized that there is some hard work which must be done and you've begun, in earnest, to do it. Over the span of our lives, whether we know it or not, each of us is gifted, bombarded with, and buy into a vast quantity of "stuff." Not just material stuff, but spiritual and religious stuff as well. Beliefs and ideas about God from our parents, from our church experiences, and from the larger society. Most of it, though of value to someone somewhere, is not much good to *us*. It usually just sits around taking up space in our hearts until we take (or make) the time to *move* it out or *throw* it out. That, really, is the function of the weekly worship service.

XI.

Worship is like a Craigslist of ideas; a way to get rid of some ideas and beliefs but, also, a means of stumbling upon others. That said, we cannot just sit there in the pews and expect them to come to us. We have to think, ponder, process, patch up, pursue and, finally, buy into what truly resonates with us. Sometimes, worship is that one place alone in our week when we can do so. Guiding it all, I think, is a moment of spiritual maturity, of spiritual clarity, when we realize we only need a surprisingly few items of faith; the rest is just clutter. Clearing out the clutter, though, is what prepares us for those moments when the miracles just *might* happen. When we would choose to truly affirm, use and, even, test our faith. Like Peter, in today's scripture reading. Peter has honed down his faith enough to ask to be put into a situation to which he would never ordinarily agree, so that he might finally, and fully, know that God exists.

XII.

Even so, when such a moment comes (and it is usually only *just* a moment) we, like Peter, have to muster our courage, our strength, and our faith to take that first step out onto the water and out into our lives. Now, if you have ever had such a moment, you *know*, and if you are ever to have such a moment in the future, I can *tell* you, it does not last very long. As soon as Peter started

walking on the water he began to notice the strong wind and became frightened and, beginning to sink, he cried out “*Lord, save me!*” Jesus reached out his hand, caught him, and said, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*”

When it is all said and done, this, really, is what the life of faith is all about. Boat-loads of doubt, overcome by just a mustard seed size amount of faith. Through such experiences, however, we discover two things. First, that faith is there to be had and we *can* have it. It is in the realm of our possibility, if only for a few moments. Second, when those moments are over God is there to reach out a hand to save us.

XIII.

Though I might not speak of these things *too* loudly, especially when I am not around church folk, I do not believe it is until one actually experiences such miraculous moments that one can say, like the disciples in the boat that morning, “*Truly you are the Son of God.*” So, this morning I would lift up to you the words of Jesus when he says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Take heart by taking control of those things which clutter your heart. Take heart, by allowing Christ to be at work in your life, and in those moments of true faith. Take heart that you, too, can step out of your faith and into your life. Take heart, that even if such faith lasts but a mere moment, Christ will be there to save you. Moreover, having stepped out *once* you can do so again. Take heart, we may be of little faith but it is enough to believe that there is a miracle out there with our name on it. Amen.