

Sermon – August 13, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Matthew 14:22-23

Wile E. Coyote is running as fast as he can to catch that pesky Road Runner. Maybe, just maybe, *this* will be the time he finally catches it. But the Road Runner is far more agile, and—as the name would suggest—it knows the roads. The road makes a sudden sharp turn, and the Road Runner zips around it... but Wile E. Coyote runs right off the cliff. And he *keeps* running. If for some reason you don't know what I'm talking about, Wile E. Coyote is a cartoon character, and in true cartoon fashion, when he runs off a cliff, it isn't until he realizes what's *happened* and looks *down*... that gravity catches *up* to him and... [he falls.]

Every time I read or hear the story of Jesus and Peter walking on water, the *first* thing I think of is Wile E. Coyote. It's the middle of the night, the moon is shining bright, the waves and the wind against them, when Jesus comes walking out through the waves... and invites Peter to step out of his fishing boat and walk toward him.

"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!'"

That's *textbook* cartoon physics right there. Peter was totally committed to hopping out of the boat and walking across the water to Jesus, and his faith *was* genuine, but a few steps later, the boat now out of reach behind him, Peter realizes what he's doing. Just like Wile E. Coyote... he looks down, looks back up at the camera, holds up a sign that says "Help!" and then... [starts to sink.]

In the grand scheme of things, taking a leap of faith is *easy*... but living a *life* of faith, that's a bit more difficult. Faith isn't about jumping off a cliff and letting gravity and the angels take over. Real faith kicks in when you've already run off the cliff, and you have to pump your cartoon legs just as hard as you can to make it across to the other side.

We've all been there: out on the limb, deep in the muck, the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune all around us. Those times when life isn't a sprint... but a marathon. Those moments they didn't prepare you for in middle school. When the oxygen in your tank is running out, and the boulevard of broken dreams... narrows into a tightrope walk.

But Wile E. Coyote knows better than anyone by this point that even under *cartoon* physics, no amount of effort on *his* part is gonna get him across the gorge to the other side. He's tried it every which way: rollerskates, rockets, rocket-powered rollerskates, a skateboard with a sail that he blew on really hard... he got *really* good at *making* the leap of faith over the years, but keeping that *momentum* up was always *just* beyond his abilities.

That's where the Gospel story is different from a cartoon. Because even when the harsh reality of the wind and the waves around him *cause* Peter's heart to skip a beat, *he* doesn't sink to the sea bottom.

Because he wasn't *on* that journey of faith *alone*. "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him."

That's the difference between the Road Runner and Jesus Christ. (*That's* a sentence you never thought you'd hear. Oh, this is the "only" difference?) The Road Runner isn't *on* Wile E. Coyote's side. But when *you* step out of *your* fishing boat, and you go *out* on a limb and you reach *out* for Jesus and things get hard, things get scary, things look impossible and *you* look like a fool, in that moment when cartoon physics kicks in and our faith falters because we just *know* we can't make it...

Jesus doesn't condemn us; Jesus doesn't give up on us. Jesus doesn't just abandon us or watch us fall and then move on to somebody who has "better" faith than us. Jesus immediately reaches out his hand.

Wile E. Coyote couldn't make it across the gorge on his own, *Peter* couldn't make it across the raging waters all by himself, and *we* can't make it through the struggles of this world that assail us... alone. It takes two very important ingredients: the courage to persevere in a life of faith, and a loving Savior who will reach out and offer a hand.

At the Wednesday morning Bible Study this week, people were wondering about what *inflection* Jesus had in his voice when he said the words to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Because the *way* he said those words would tell us a lot about what he meant by them.

And *I* don't know any more about Jesus' tone of voice than any of the monks who copied and re-copied the Gospels over the centuries, or any of the modern academics who translated them to English. All I can tell you is what I like to *imagine* when I read those words. The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear them.

When I see those words... I picture a half-smile, a glint of moonlight in Christ's eyes. I see him throwing his windblown hair out of his face, with an amused grunt as he heaves headstrong Peter out of the latest pickle he's gotten himself stuck in. I hear a little *laugh*. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I don't hear frustration or judgment. I hear the voice of a parent sitting on the living room floor catching their toddler as he trips taking his first steps.

And I'll tell you why I think that, because as a pastor I need to have a better explanation than just "vibes." I hear that inflection in his voice... because I look the order that things happened in verse 31. He didn't say, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

then grudgingly reach down and offer his hand to the sinking disciple. The Gospel is very clear: “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?’” You can’t record inflection in the pages of the Bible, just like you can’t type sarcasm in an email or a text. So how do you make Christ’s heart clear on the page? By the way you write the words *around* what he said. “Jesus immediately reached out his hand.”

That’s all I need to read to know how Jesus feels when *my* faith falters. When I’m one-too-many steps away from the boat and the sober light of the moon reminds me of the wind and the waves of the predicament I’ve gotten myself into. After the adrenaline of the leap of faith wears off and I realize that the journey I’m on is gonna be longer and harder and more punishing than I thought. When I’m chasing the Road Runner off the cliff and *finally* cartoon physics kicks in. My faith falters.

Who among you hasn’t had that moment? This is too much. I can’t go on. I am alone. This is gonna kill me. This whole thing was a mistake. “Father, why have you forsaken me?” I will remind you who it was who *said* those words, “Father, why have you forsaken me;” that was *Jesus*! Suffering on the cross. Even he, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the Divine in human form, even *he* had a moment when he looked down and it all caught up with him.

So *how* could you be alone? How could you be *expected* to cross the gorges of your life, to wade across the wind and the waves on your own power *alone*... when there is a *higher* power that knows *exactly* what it feels like when cartoon physics kicks in?

So the next time on the never-ending journey of your life of faith, when the wind and the waves buffeting you make you acutely aware of your own mortality, your own fragility, and the magnitude of the challenges weighing down on you like *gravity*... I want you to remember that *Peter* started to sink too. I want you to remember Wile E. Coyote looking down.

And then I want you to look up. Because I know what you’ll see when you do. It’s the same thing that Peter saw when *he* looked up. *Immediately*. He saw the hand of Christ reaching out to grab him and keep his head above water. The waves *could* not claim him. Even if he couldn’t *walk* across them, they had *no* claim on him, not so long as Jesus had the last word.

So in those moments when life *reminds* you to look down... if you look up, you will see the love of God reaching out to offer you a hand. *Immediately*. You may not walk on water. And God knows I’ve never learned how to surf the waves. But God’s love for you will never let you sink. And so we wade, we stumble, we swallow seawater and we doggy paddle and we kick our cartoon legs for dear life.

That's *our* half of a life of faith.

Jesus... he's already doing his half. *Immediately*. So when you start to sink... look up, reach out, and hang on for dear life.

Leaping out of the boat... that kind of faith is easy, really. A *life* of faith is what you do *after* you look down. And every wave after that.

Amen.