“...the boat, battered by the waves, was far from land, for the wind was against them.” (vs 24) Sounds as though the disciples, separated from Jesus, had legitimate reasons to be afraid. Today’s text immediately follows the long day, which I described last week. So, we can imagine a group of fatigued men now having to contend with unexpected high winds keeping them from the shore. They may even have been afraid that they could not survive this storm alive.

Have you had any experiences which might help you identify with the experience of the disciples? I was never in a boat where I feared for my survival. But I was on a smaller cruise ship a couple of years ago crossing the Aegean Sea from Athens, Greece, to Ephesus, Turkey. It was the most rocky night I have experienced on a cruise ship. However, I felt more annoyed with shifting in bed and hearing doors slamming, than fearful for my life.

There is one life-threatening experience I recall from my youth. When I was eight or nine years old, I was accompanying my truck driver father on a trip from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to New York City. Early in our trip, we had to pass through a freeway tunnel. As we approached, the tunnel, sirens and flashing yellow lights went off and my father pulled to the side of this busy freeway. He immediately went to the median area to discover what was the problem. It turns out that the load was possibly too high to permit travel through the tunnel. After a couple of minutes, I decided to follow my father. I was a bit disoriented over what was happening. I simply began to cross the freeway without even looking for traffic. My father screamed at me causing me to look at oncoming traffic. I saw another truck barreling down on me. Fortunately, I raced across the road barely missing being run down. This memory helps me to identify with the state of mind that the disciples might have been experiencing in today’s text when “...the boat, battered by the waves, was far from land, for the wind was against them.”

And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. (vs 25)

Commentator Iwan Russell-Jones has this to say about this miracle today’s text: “In Hebraic thought, water represents much more than a mere physical reality. Whether it is the sea with its unfathomable depths, the relentless river in full flood, or the all-consuming deluge, there is something metaphysical about the threat water poses to human life.”

Russell-Jones also points out that God’s victory over the metaphysical forces of water play a central role much of the story of God’s relationship with Israel. This includes in the creation story (Gen. 1:2), in the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), and in the deliverance from

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1 Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).
Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21). So it is in today’s story when Jesus walked on water. Not only does Jesus rescue the disciples from physical danger, but this story is, once again, pointing to God’s power over the forces of water. God’s power and authority is what is being revealed by Jesus walking on the sea.

Rev. Michael Piazzza is a consultant whom I have worked with through the Minnesota Conference UCC. He is also currently serving and revitalizing a small church in Atlanta, GA. In his August 6th “Liberating Word” daily devotional, he says this about Jesus walking on water: "What do the miracles of Jesus mean to those of us who have tried to give up magical thinking? As I ponder that, I find myself wondering what it means to be a person of faith if you give up magical thinking.”

I resonate completely with this perspective. I have often said that I believe that faith only exists in the face of doubt. Without doubt there would be no need for faith. Without doubt, we would have sure and certain knowledge. Faith exerts its power in our lives when we express our faith and live out our faith despite our doubt.

I believe that all of life is miraculous. I am always in amazement about the very nature of my existence. Breath is a mystery to me. Thought is a mystery to me. Spirit is a mystery to me. This is true for me despite all of my course work in science, in psychology and in theology. I believe that much of the essence of life is truly a mystery even to the most scientific of minds. No scientist, for me, has adequately explained the great mysteries of the source of creation and the meaning of infinity.

So, how did the disciples respond to Jesus approaching the boat by walking on the sea. “...they were terrified, saying ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.” (vs 26)

Commentators have debated why it might be that the disciples could not recognize Jesus and then proclaimed “It is a ghost!” (vs 26) Could it have been their state of mind triggered by their fear? Could it have been that Jesus’ appearance was different from the human form with which they were familiar? Even after Jesus spoke to them saying “…it is I; do not be afraid...” (vs 27), Peter’s response still does not convey full recognition. He says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” (vs 28)

When Jesus commanded Peter to come, Peter overcame his fear and walked on water toward Jesus. Can we imagine ourselves able to overcome fear in such challenging circumstances?

Ingrid Dilley is a person who taught me about overcoming fear. She is a cancer survivor who wrote the program which I co-facilitated for more than 15 years at the healing center where I worked. She taught that there are real fears and there are imagined fears. Real fear is like what I felt when I noticed the truck barreling down on me and what the disciples

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2 Liberating Word, Miracles and Magical Thinking. A publication of The Center for Progressive Renewal, 743 Virginia Ave NE, Atlanta, GA 30306
3 Renewing Life™, written by Ingrid Dilley and Carol Troestler, Madison, WI.
may have been feeling in the boat when they were being battered by waves. Real fear is experienced in the present moment. There are times when many of us may have experienced immediate threats of physical harm. However, Dilley proposes that all other fears are imagined fears. They are not really happening in the present moment.

Imagined fears are given power to negatively impact our present lives because we are projecting them into the future. I once had a staff colleague who was diagnosed with cancer from a routine physical exam. She had no physical symptoms. Her physician told her that her cancer was inoperable and incurable and would likely progress to take her life without a few months. She came to our staff meeting to share this news and was filled with fear. Even though this was natural, I made a suggestion to her. I asked her to focus on her breath and to say these words, “I am whole and healthy today.” She later told me that this affirmation had a profound effect on her and continues to have a profound effect today. She has significantly outlived her prognosis and continues to be able to affirm, “I am whole and healthy today.” I have no scientific evidence to prove that her current health status is a miracle, but I like to believe that it is.

So, how would we classify the fear the disciples experienced when they saw Jesus walking on the sea. Even though they were observing Jesus in the present moment, I would classify their fear as imagined. They could not believe what they were seeing and no one would blame them for that. There is no blame for imagined fear. However, when we can recognize the fear as imagining, we can choose to not give it power in the present moment, to not project our fears into the future.

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’” (vs 27) It seems to me that Jesus is saying, your fear is not real. It is imagined. ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’” (vs 27)

And what about our fears today? I know that many of us are experiencing fear. Fear of illness or the illness of loved ones; fear of the effects of aging; fear of financial stability; fear of violence being done to ourselves, to people in our communities, and to people in our world; fear of wars and other forms of injustice prevalent throughout our world; fear of climate change; fear of the stranger; fear of an uncertain future; and many more that you could name for yourselves.

I also know that many of us are experiencing fear for this faith community and its future. Fear of being without a minister or of finding the right minister; fear of financial shortages; fear of those who disagree with us; fear of those who may be experienced as expressing themselves in hurtful ways; fear of conflict; fear of the need to review our history and past challenges; fear of those who may be perceived as misusing power; and possibly many more that you could name for yourselves.

I believe all of these individual and communal fears, which I have named, are primarily imagined fears. That is not to deny the nature of life, of health challenges, of aging, of violence and wars, of climate change, or of people who do harm to others. That is not to deny the reality of our past communal experiences, of past hurts, of past conflict. I believe
that one way to move from fear to hope is to recognize imagined fears as imagined. The way to move from fear to hope is to recognize that in the present moment we have power and choice. We have the choice to continue to be driven by our fears into the future. Or we have the choice to live by hope for a better future for each of us, for this community, and for the world.

Our text today shows us another way to move from fear to hope. When Jesus said to Peter, “Come” (vs 29), Peter got out of the boat. Peter exercised leadership for his community – a community overcome with fear. Peter took the risk to try and walk on water. None of the other disciples spoke up. None of the other disciples asked Jesus to command him to come out on the water. None of the other disciples had the courage to get out of the boat.

Commentator Clifton Kirkpatrick says it this way: *If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith...*  

To move from fear to hope, we need to get out of the boat. Will you covenant today to get out of the boat? We need to get out of the boat and reach out for the hand of Jesus. I believe that all the fears and challenges which you and I face individually can be transformed by hope and our individual lives can be filled with amazing, miraculous possibilities. We need to have faith that Jesus will rescue us if we get in trouble. When we reach out for Jesus even with our doubts, God can produce miracles. Hope is empowering. Hope is transformative.

When we pray and discern the future of this community, do we see ourselves as “splashing about in the safe shallows”? Will you covenant today to join with others in this community to move this community from fear to hope? Will you covenant to get out of the boat and into the deep waters? What might this mean? It might mean giving more generously to the Bridge campaign, fulfilling our financial pledges for 2014, making and fulfilling a pledge if you have not done so or have withheld on your pledges, or actually increasing our giving. It might mean volunteering as reader, usher or greeter. It might mean renewing and/or continuing your covenant of ministry in whatever ways your feel inspired by God. It might mean getting involved now in Fall program planning and in the celebration of this church’s 75th Anniversary. None of this needs to wait until you have full-time interim minister or a full time settled minister. You can get out of the boat today. All the challenges we face as a community can be transformed by hope. I believe this community, with God’s help, has a future filled with amazing, miraculous possibilities. May it be so. Amen.

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