

"They Supposed It Was a Ghost"

If you go to an optometrist, it's to help you see better. The disciples in our passage, had trouble seeing. They had trouble recognizing Jesus. When they saw him in the waters, they thought he was a ghost. Did they need to see an optometrist?

Well, no. That wasn't their problem. It wasn't their physical sight at the end of the day that kept them from recognizing Jesus. Because at the end of the passage, they will physically see that it is Jesus. He will call out to them, and then even get into the boat with them. But even when that happens, and they see with their eyes that it is indeed Jesus, they seem to still have trouble truly recognizing him. They saw him with their eyes, but they didn't understand him with their hearts. That's what verse 52 tells us. Their hearts were hardened. So if they didn't need an optometrist, does this mean that they needed a cardiologist? No, their problem with recognizing Jesus was not something that any earthly doctor could solve. They did need their hearts to be worked on, but that was something only Jesus, the Great Physician could do. Not with craft of human hands, of course, but by the working of his spirit inside them. And this is the same sort of heart surgery that each of us needs.

And so as we look at this passage, and see the focus explicitly turn toward the disciples, we are reminded of our passage from last week. Last week we looked at the feeding of the five thousand. And I made the point last week how Mark showed that Jesus was teaching the twelve disciples a lesson. Jesus continues to be teaching the twelve disciples a lesson in this week's passage. He's continuing to bring them into a greater recognition of who he is.

And so beginning in verse 45, we pick up where we left off last week. In verse 45 it says that immediately after the miracle of feeding the five thousand Jesus sends off the disciples. He has them get into a boat and head back toward the heart of Galilee, away from the wilderness and back into the general area where Jesus has been doing the bulk of his ministry. Jesus stays behind with the crowds to send them away.

Evidently Jesus is successful in dispersing the crowd because in verse 46, we find him going up to a mountain in the area and spending some time alone in prayer. And then in verse 47 we see Mark establish the setting for this next event: Jesus walking on water. Verse 47 tells us that evening had come, Jesus is all alone on the land, and the disciples are out at sea making progress in their journey, somewhere in the midst of the Sea of Galilee.

But then in verse 48, Mark tells us that there is trouble at sea! Jesus sees the disciples straining at rowing the boat. A strong wind had arose which was hindering the disciples. Notice how Mark tells us that Jesus sees the disciples. As I've already introduced, the disciples have problems seeing Jesus in this passage. But here, right when the trouble begins, Jesus has no problem seeing the disciples and their need. In fact, he sees them even when it's dark out. Mark tells us that this was happening during the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. Unlike the disciples, Jesus will have no problem seeing, even when he should have.

Mark then suggests in verse 48 that the reason Jesus goes to the disciples is because he sees them in distress on the lake. The timeline is a little unspecific in this passage, but there is enough information given to us to make us see that the disciples were really having a rough time here. First we are told it was evening in verse 37, and that by that time, the disciples were already well into the midst of the sea. This word for evening is a word that generally represents the time after the sun sets but before it gets fully dark. So this was probably about the twilight just after sunset. At that point, the disciples were well into the midst of the sea, it says. And yet, by the fourth watch, sometime after 3 a.m. the disciples still hadn't arrived at the other side of the sea. It's hard to know for sure the exact distance between their origin and destination, but from what we do know, it seems that we're talking normally somewhere in the 3 to 5 hour range to make a trip like this. And yet, by 3 a.m. Jesus sees them struggling against the wind, and still not having arrived. So, I want you to note that the disciples were not just up against any small wind. This was a pretty significant wind that was really causing them to work really hard trying to row the boat, and they just were not making much headway. They might have had to row hard just to keep from losing ground. Were not given much details about the storm, but obviously, the wind was really hindering them.

And so Jesus sees them, recognizes that they are in this trouble, and he decides to go them. Obviously, Jesus is going to them with a purpose to help them. And yet he is also teaching them something amidst this, because he proceeds to walk toward them, on the water! And yet verse 48 says something interesting. As he comes to them, it says that he "would have passed them by." The word seems to suggest an intention by Jesus to pass them by. Why would he want to pass them by? Didn't Mark just tell us that he came to them because he saw that they were having trouble? Now Mark tells us that Jesus intended to pass by them. That seems a bit strange, and certainly commentators have discussed that a lot. Some have suggested that Jesus intended to walk by them in order to get the disciples to call out to them. That Jesus was teaching the disciples to recognize him, and call to him when they had need. It's quite possible that's what going on here. Jesus obviously wants us to call to him amidst our plights.

But, of course, for the disciples to have called to Jesus, that meant that they had to first recognize him. But in verse 49, when they see Jesus approaching, they did not recognize him! They actually thought Jesus was a ghost! The Greek word is *phantasma* - where we get the English word "phantom". So the disciples see Jesus, but they don't see him. They see him, but they don't recognize them. Instead they get spooked. They think he is some ghost or goblin out to get them!

And why should they think it is Jesus? What *man* could walk on water? Think about that: who can walk on water? Beside it was extremely windy, they had been up rowing hard all night long, after having a large meal to their fill, and it was dark. They were probably delirious and exhausted at that point. Why should they think it was Jesus? And so what do they do? They cry out! They cry out. They do not *call* out to him, but they cry out. Maybe if they did think he was a ghost, they could have at least called out to Jesus back on the shore, believing that he could help them. And yet that's all part of the problem with the disciples; their faith is limited at this point.

And so the disciples, by crying out, show that they do not yet recognize Jesus. To them, this figure walking on water is a ghost or phantom out to get them. But in effort to calm them, Jesus speaks out to them from the sea on which he stands. "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And then he gets into the boat with them... and the wind stops.

This had to all be so surreal. One moment they are all spooked, scared to death of some ghost, all the while the wind is pushing them violently back. Then Jesus speaks to them, encourages them, gets in the boat, and boom - stillness. The sea is calm again. The disciples must have been dumbfounded, and that's what verse 51 tells us. They were greatly amazed.

I'd imagine that to describe them as amazed probably doesn't do full justice to their emotions. I think it would be safe to say that they were also perplexed. Essentially that's what verse 52 is saying. It says that they were amazed, because they hadn't understood about the feeding of the five thousand, and so they didn't understand this miracle either. One commentator talks about the disciples' response saying that they just wouldn't have had the "categories" to even understand what just happened (Lane). They saw Jesus physically in the boat with them, but how could they explain it? People don't walk on water. If they had tried to explain it to anyone, surely they'd be laughed at. How could they even believe it? At that point that surely saw Jesus. They saw him with their eyes in the boat. But they didn't recognize him. I mean they recognized him physically, as their teacher Jesus, but they hadn't recognized Jesus for who he really is. If they did, then they wouldn't have so much difficulty understanding what just happened. It would have been impossible to understand how an ordinary man could have walked on water to them. But it's completely possible to understand how God could walk on the very waters which he created. But though they now saw and recognized Jesus with their eyes, they did not see and recognize him with their hearts as the Son of God. Their problem, Mark tells us, is that their hearts were hardened - verse 52.

So what I hope is clear so far is that the disciples had trouble truly recognizing Jesus for who he is. And what I'd like to look at now is four literary foils that are present in here Mark's gospel. Four things that stand out as a witness against these disciples. These are four things that tell us that the disciples should have been able to recognize and identify Jesus properly here, but didn't.

The first foil is the previous miracle on the sea. Remember, back in chapter 4, Jesus and the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee when a horrible storm arose. The disciples woke up Jesus and he commanded the wind and waves to be calm, and they became calm. That first miracle should have told the disciples that Jesus was God in the flesh. Now in our passage for today, Jesus' walking on water here clearly brings to mind that previous miracle. Surely it was no natural coincidence that as soon as Jesus got on the boat that the wind stopped. When the wind stopped like that, it should have instantly reminded the disciples of this first miracle on the sea. A bell should have rang in their minds, and they should have understood who Jesus really is, the eternal Son of God come in the flesh, the one with power over wind and wave.

The second foil is the feeding of the five thousand. That is mentioned by Mark explicitly in verse 52. The disciples had just witnessed Jesus' power over the elements of bread and fish. He had just miraculously multiplied these few loaves and fish into enough to feed five thousand men, with twelve baskets left over. If they understood what Jesus did in that miracle, then they should have understood what Jesus did in this miracle. If they recognized Jesus power in that miracle to feed the multitudes in the wilderness with supernatural bread, then they should have recognized his power here. But of course, Mark tells us that they did not understand the feeding of the five thousand. That miracle testifies against them as a sign of their hardness of heart.

And that's the third foil - their hardness of heart. Mark says in verse 52 that they didn't understand because they had hard hearts. And yet who are the people in

Mark's gospel that have the hard hearts? It's the Pharisees. The Pharisees, Jesus central opposition in the gospel, are the ones that Mark repeatedly reports as having hard hearts. Now the disciples are effectively compared with the Pharisees. Their hardness of hearts is likened to the hardness of hearts which Jesus' enemies had!

The last foil in this passage, and to me possibly the most damning, is what we find in verses 53-56. These few verses summarize Jesus ministry after they return to the area of Galilee. Every so often Mark includes a few summary verses of Jesus' ministry. They might seem like just little unimportant summaries. But these few verses I think speak loudly against the disciples here. Look at verse 54. "And when they came out of the boat, immediately the people recognized him." "Him." Last week in verse 33, we saw the people recognize "them" - the focus was on the people recognizing the disciples. Here, the people recognize Jesus. The emphasis is on their *recognition* of Jesus. And notice the immediacy. They *immediately* recognize Jesus. They see Jesus, and know who he is and what he can do. And so they bring all their sick to him, so that he can miraculously heal them. The crowds flock to Jesus, because they recognize him and know what he can do. And the only thing that's talked about here is the miracles. It doesn't even mention Jesus teaching them. The focus is on people seeing Jesus and recognizing his supernatural powers. And they believe, and so they all flock to him.

Do you see how damning this is to the disciples? They had saw Jesus, but didn't recognize him. They saw him walking on the water and didn't recognize him. He got on board, and though they saw him then, they didn't really recognize him at that point. They were amazed, yes, but also perplexed, dumbfounded, not understanding who he really is. Yet this multitude of people, instantly recognize Jesus and his power.

The very twelve disciples, Jesus' inner circle, sent out as apostles and ministering in his name, still weren't fully recognizing who Jesus is. If the people here could believe because they had seen Jesus' past miracles, certainly the disciples had seen all those miracles, and more! They had been with Jesus, following him all over, watching him perform miracle after miracle. And they had witnessed the feeding of the five thousand in ways the crowds had not. They had seen Jesus calm the wind - twice, and they had even seen him walk on water. How could they be so dull, while the people so quick to recognize Jesus. Surely the people's response here is to the disciples' shame. The disciples, with their hardness of hearts, seem to have more in common with the Pharisees at this point, than with this crowd of people who were flocking to Jesus.

So these four things in Mark stand out as testimony against the disciples: the previous miracle on the sea, the feeding of the five thousand, their similarity to the Pharisees, and the crowd's immediate recognition of Jesus. All of these things are to the shame of the disciples. They should have recognized Jesus.

And since the disciples had seen so much of Jesus and his ministry already, what should they have recognized here in Jesus when he walked on water? Well, I would submit to you, that they should have recognized that Jesus was God. They should have seen this event as similar to a theophany of the Old Testament. A theophany in the Old Testament is when God appeared on earth in some physical manifestation. And that is exactly what Jesus is - he is an appearance of God, for he is God come in the flesh.

And when we looked at the first miracle at sea, where Jesus calmed the wind and rain by his very word, I pointed out how all through the Old Testament it is God alone who is shown as being in control of the wind and waves. And now here again,

Jesus had control over the wind and waves - he actually walks on the waves and when he enters the boat the wind instantly stops! So this certainly points a theophany - that God was there meeting the disciples on the sea in the person of Jesus Christ!

But there's more. Look at Jesus' words as he walks on the water. Look at verse 50. Unfortunately, his exact words get a bit lost in translation. When Jesus says in verse 50, "It is I," the Greek words are *ego eimi*, which translates most literally, "I am." So if I translate Jesus' words most literally it would be, "Take Heart, I am; Fear Not". So what's so important with Jesus saying literally "I am"? Is that just bad grammar on Jesus part? Actually, it's not even bad grammar in Greek. In Greek, you could say "I am" in order to convey what you see translated in English here, "It is I." So, why am I making a big deal about this? Well, in the Old Testament, when God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3, Moses asked God his name. And God replied, saying "I am who I am," so tell the people that "I am" sent you. And so that's what God's name basically became in the Old Testament. That's the basic meaning of Yahweh or Jehovah, the English rendering of God's name from the Hebrew. And so in the New Testament, in several places we see Jesus refer to himself as "I am", *ego eimi*, seeming to allude back to God's divine name of "I am" in the Old Testament.

So how do we know that is what Jesus is referring to here? How do we know that Jesus is making a reference to his divine status here? How do we know that we should understand this as a reference to the name of God and not just as casual Greek language? Well, to be fair, obviously the disciples must not have understood Jesus words in this way. If they did, then they would have recognized Jesus correctly. But I would submit to you that this is indeed what Jesus' words represent. Just notice a few facts here. First, don't forget that Jesus is walking on water when he utters these words. That alone demands seeing this event as a theophany, as Jesus being revealed as God among man! But notice how Jesus encloses his words of "I am". He says, "Be of good cheer," or "take heart," and then he says "do not be afraid," or "fear not." These commands to not fear are clearly the sort of commands we hear God speak in the Old Testament regularly. These are words he tells his people and his prophets regularly in the Old Testament. Fear not God says. That is what Jesus says twice, surrounding this statement of I am. He calls the disciples to not fear but take heart. And why should they not fear? Because Jesus says, "I am."

And this is possibly the real key to understanding why the text tells us that Jesus intended to "pass them by" in verse 48. We said it was strange for Jesus to go to them to help them, but then intend to "pass them by." But when we think about this passage in terms of theophany, in terms of a revelation of God, then it actually makes sense. That is what God did with Moses and Elijah when he revealed himself to them in his theophanic glory. God "passed by" Moses in the cleft of the rock (Ex 33:19, 22). God "passed by" Elijah as well when he revealed himself to Elijah in 1 Kings 19. The same Greek word used here in Mark is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for both these events with Moses and Elijah.

If all these hints in this passage are taken together, we see a beautiful picture. We see Jesus revealing to the disciples who he truly is. We see Jesus intending to pass by them in glory as the Lord of the wind and waves. And when the disciples mistake him for a ghost, he lovingly calls to them, telling them not to fear, for the God of the heavens and the earth was with them. That is who the disciples were to have recognized. They were to see and recognize that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the Christ who has come to save his people.

Saints of God, do you recognize Jesus? Do you recognize Jesus for who he truly is? Do you see him as the eternal Son of God? Do you see him as the Great I AM? Do you see him as the great God who created all things, the wind and waves, the fields and the fish? Or do you have some lesser perspective of Jesus?

Now some of you might be thinking right now - oh this sounds like a lesson for unbelievers or new Christians. That's whom this passage applies to - unbelievers, people who need to know who Jesus is for the first time. Well, I'm sure this passage is helpful for unbelievers and new Christians, but I'd like to suggest that this is a lesson that we all need. This is a lesson that applies even to more mature Christians.

Just think about who this lesson is directed to in our passage. It's not directed to the crowds who would be full of people who had no clue about Jesus. It's directed to Jesus' inner circle of disciples. It's directed to the twelve disciples. These are the very people who had just gotten back from being sent out as apostles in Christ's name. These disciples were already being used in ministry by Jesus. And yet they were still in a learning process themselves.

You see, if anyone should have known who Jesus is, it should be these twelve disciples! And yet here in this passage, we see that they have more in common with Jesus' mortal enemies the Pharisees than they do with the uniformed multitudes. Now surely this was just one aspect of the disciples. Surely there are many ways in which they did understand more about Jesus than anyone else. And yet Mark hones in on the fact that even this inner circle of disciples still were on a spiritual journey. They hadn't arrived yet. They were still to be learning, even while serving. They still had much to learn about Jesus.

That's a message we all need to hear this morning. Don't think you've arrived. Realize that you still have more to learn. Recognize, that you don't recognize Jesus as truly as you ought. You still have more to learn about him. And isn't that what a relationship is all about? If we are to have a personal relationship with Jesus, then you must be ever striving to learn more about Jesus. Human relationships stagnate when someone thinks they already know everything about the other person. Human relationships thrive when two people strive to know one another more and more each day.

And so when we look upon Jesus, even those of us who've been Christians a long time, we each need to be challenged to grow. We each need to be challenged to rid ourselves from any wrong understandings of Jesus that we may have. Just as our passage points out, we all need new hearts if we are going to understand Jesus. Even if you have come to Christ, and he has given you a new heart, we must realize that this side of heaven, this is not completely a one-time thing. Yes, in one sense it is - we come to Jesus and he gives us a new heart. But before Jesus returns, we recognize that there are all sorts of things that would encourage us to harden our hearts. If we have harder hearts, we will have trouble understanding who Jesus really is. We'll have trouble seeing how he is at work in our lives. We'll have trouble getting involved in serving him. We'll have trouble having patience and love for his saints. We'll have all sorts of troubles as we harden our hearts against Christ and the gospel. Instead, we need to pray that we will have softer and softer hearts; hearts that are growing in grace. We must not be content to stagnate in our growth, but pray that God will continue to soften and mold our hearts more and more. As we do that, we will know Christ better, because God will be making us more and more like Christ. Praise be to Christ, the Lord of the sea, and the Lord of our lives! The one who silences the wind, and even silences the sin in our lives. Amen.

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