

"Take Courage! It is I"

Mark 6:45-56

Key Verse: 6:50b

"Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'"

In today's passage Jesus teaches his disciples a very important secret: how to finish the race they have started. This refers primarily to finishing God's mission and finishing the life of faith successfully. However, in any endeavor, finishing is important. Dr. Samuel Lee had a motto, "Start prayerfully, and finish strong." This applies to all areas of life. According to published statistics, of all the students who start as freshmen in NCAA Division I universities in the United States, about 61% graduate with a bachelor's degree. That means that 39% started school but did not finish. Obviously, finishing is not easy, and it is a problem for many students. In today's passage Jesus' disciples started something that they could not finish. But Jesus helped them to finish strong. Jesus gave them victory. Let's learn from Jesus how to finish strong.

I. Jesus trains his disciples to know their need (45-48a).

Verse 45 says, "Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd." In this verse, the word "made" seems to jump out at us. In the Greek it is *anankazo* and means to compel forcefully. Jesus exercises strong leadership in this moment. It seems that Jesus sensed a crisis that demanded his immediate and decisive action. Jesus was fully alert spiritually, even after performing a great miracle. Why did Jesus make his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him? Mark's gospel indicates that the problem was with his disciples. Mark, in contrast to John, says nothing about the crowd's response to Jesus' miracle. Mark focuses his attention on the disciples. What could be their problem? In verse 52 Mark comments that they had not understood about the loaves and that their hearts were hardened. Through the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus wanted them to learn to be responsible and compassionate shepherds and to have faith in him to do the impossible. But they did not understand Jesus' mind and their hearts were hard. Perhaps, just perhaps, they had become proud after experiencing the great power of Jesus working through them.

Before this experience the disciples had been men of despair and fear in times of hardship. Jesus wanted to change them into men of great faith who could be a blessing to others in difficult times. So he let them experience his power. When they went out two by two, he gave his authority to them. When he fed the crowds, he let them organize the crowd and distribute the bread and fish to them. When the disciples experienced the power of God working through them their inner despair was melted and their fear was gone. However, they may have fallen into the illusion that they could perform miracles. So they needed another kind of training. They needed to experience that without Jesus they could do nothing. The disciples may have been very excited and eager to stay among the crowd of people. But Jesus made them get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida.

Spiritual pride is a deadly disease. It arises after one has been used by God to do something extraordinary. For example, King Saul was once a timid fellow who hid himself among the baggage when people wanted to make him their king. He seemed to be a humble person. The first time he faced a great crisis, God gave him the Spirit of God and enabled him to mobilize all Israel and win a great victory over their enemies. Saul became very popular with his people and his kingship was affirmed. Then he became proud. He forgot God's one-sided grace. When he faced another crisis, he presumed to offer the sacrifice, invading the office of the priest. He did not distinguish between himself and God. This grieved God deeply. It was the direct reason that God withdrew his blessing from Saul. Inordinate pride in the time of success has been the downfall for many "one-hit wonders" in sports, music, academics, and in many fields of endeavor. A few years ago, Ohio State won the national championship in football. One of their star players was a freshman running back. After his great victory, this young freshman did not want to return to OSU but go directly into the NFL as a pro. His audacity was shocking. Soon he disappeared and is now in prison. The Bible says, "A man's pride brings him low..." (Pr 29:23). When Jesus sensed pride in his disciples, he dealt with it decisively.

After sending off his disciples, Jesus dismissed the crowd and went up on a mountainside to pray. He must have prayed for his disciples to pass through their spiritual crisis by renewing humble dependence on him. He must have prayed for the crowds of people who had tasted the love of God and needed shepherds to follow up on them. He must have prayed for strength and wisdom to serve God's mission. Jesus, the Son of God, showed us his example that he depended on God in prayer. So we have no excuse not to pray. Are we busy? Jesus was far more busy. Are we tired? Jesus must have been completely exhausted. Are we in a crisis? Jesus was in the midst of at least three crises. As prayer was essential to Jesus, it must be to us as well. We must prepare our upcoming summer Bible conferences with prayer.

Look at verses 47-48a. "When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them." Mark seems to emphasize the fact that Jesus and his disciples were separated. The disciples were in the middle of the lake and Jesus was alone on land. This separation lasted for some time. Evening probably began at 6:00 p.m. The fourth watch of the night began at 3:00 a.m. Some 9 hours passed. Jesus saw his disciples, but they did not see Jesus. The disciples were fighting against the wind, and not making any progress. They must have done their best. They rowed hard until their muscles ached. They must have organized into teams and taken turns. They must have used the best rowing techniques taught by veteran fishermen. But no matter how hard they struggled, they did not make any progress at all. They were still in the middle of the lake. They felt that they were going nowhere. Without Jesus, the disciples were going nowhere.

Let's remember that Jesus told his disciples to go ahead of him to Bethsaida. They were obeying Jesus' words. They were doing their best to follow Jesus' direction. But they were going nowhere. This tells us that disciples of Jesus

need more than human effort to complete their obedience to Jesus' commands. With human effort, we can get to the middle of the lake, but not to the other side. Jesus helped his disciples learn this through experience. Some of us may feel like the disciples. We have begun to obey Jesus' command practically. Jesus said, "You give them something to eat," so we have begun to invite students to Bible study. However, we have met only rejections, a sea of rejections. Or we may have begun Bible study with someone, but that person does not seem to grow at all. Our Bible student is stuck, and so are we. Or perhaps we are struggling to form our house church into a vessel pleasing to God. Yet it does not seem to be growing as we would want. After struggling, we become tired. There is a lesson to be learned in this. It is that human effort without Christ does not bring us to the finish line. We need Jesus. Jesus is watching and waiting for us to realize this.

II. Jesus Teaches His Disciples That He is God (48b-52).

Jesus saw that his disciples had had enough. So he decided to go out to them. Look at verse 48b. "About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake." Mark emphasizes that Jesus walked on the lake by repeating it two times and presenting all of the disciples as the witnesses to the event. Mark really wants us to know that Jesus walked on water. No human being can walk on water. But Jesus walked on water. Jesus glided regally toward his disciples, walking on the water. What was so hard for the disciples to face was so easy for Jesus to rule over. Jesus is God who created the heavens and the earth. John 1:3 says of Jesus, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Though Jesus could walk on water, he did not usually do so. This was a special revelation to his disciples. Jesus wanted them to know who he really was so they could depend on him and have victory.

How did they respond? Did they welcome Jesus, saying, "Wow! It's Jesus! We are so glad to see you, Master." No. They thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. When they were struggling with their own effort, they did not see Jesus as Jesus, but as a ghost. Even if Jesus were a ghost, they did not need to be terrified. They could have stood and ventured to do battle with the ghost as they had driven out demons. But they yelled in terror. It shows that they had no confidence in themselves or their past experience. In this moment they could know themselves. Without Christ they were powerless and fearful. They did not cry out, "Save us Jesus." But they cried out in fear. They had no faith, no courage, no strength, no spirituality. They were empty, tired and afraid.

When we see the event from the disciples' point of view, we sympathize with them. They had a hard time. Moreover, as Mark tells it, Jesus deliberately let them reach their limit before intervening. Why did Jesus do this? Jesus is the expert disciple maker. Jesus tears down in order to build up. Jesus helps us realize our limits truly so that we can depend on him completely. It was Jesus' one-sided grace to educate his disciples in this way.

Still, Jesus did not want the disciples to remain in their awful self-realization and fear any longer than necessary. The moment they came to the bottom of themselves, he helped them to see him. Look at verse 50b. "Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'" As soon as they cried out, Jesus spoke to them immediately. When Jesus spoke to them, they began to recognize him. It was through his word that they could restore their love relationship with him. Let's think about what Jesus said to them.

First, Jesus said, "Take courage!" In that moment, what they needed most was courage. They needed to overcome their feeling of terror and stand in the courage that Christ gives, and to see things as he sees them. The characteristic of a man is a courageous spirit. The disciples were ordinary men. But Jesus imparted to them courage that comes from above. Jesus changed them from fearful men into courageous men. This courage was a spiritual gift from him. They must always remember that Jesus is their source of courage. We can find great assurance in Jesus who gives us courage in our time of need.

There are many stories of courageous faith in the Bible. One of the greatest is about boy David when he slew the giant Goliath. At a time when all Israel was trembling with fear, David had the courage to stand up and fight the giant. In fact, David's heart was burning against the enemy of God. His courage came from the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart after he was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be God's servant. When we see Peter in the gospels, he is often fearful, as he was in this event. But after the Holy Spirit came upon him at Pentecost, he was changed into a courageous servant of God who could preach the gospel boldly to the very men who had put Jesus to death. Here we learn that when Jesus imparts courage it changes any ordinary man into a great spiritual leader. Lord Jesus, please grant me this courage to stand as a leader and disciple maker in these times.

Then Jesus said, "It is I." "I" means the Son of God and the Savior of the world, and the one who knew and loved each of them personally. When the disciples saw Jesus walk on water and come to them through the rough wind, it was a revelation of his divine power. Jesus showed them something they had not seen before. However, this was not the first time he had revealed his divinity to them. He wanted them to know and remember who he really was. This was the same Jesus who rebuked the wind and the waves in the midst of a violent storm; the waters became calm immediately. This was the same Jesus who drove out 6,000 demons from a man with his mighty power. This was the same Jesus who had raised a dead girl to life again with one word of his mouth. This Jesus was God who rules nature, the spiritual world, and the power of death, and who brings salvation and victory to those who accept him. At the same time, this Jesus was the friend and Savior of the disciples. This Jesus personally healed Peter's mother-in-law from a fever as an encouragement to Peter's new life of faith. This Jesus had called Matthew to follow him when nobody thought Matthew had any hope to be a great man. This Jesus loved John so much that John called himself, "The disciple whom Jesus loved."

When Jesus revealed himself to the disciples he wanted them to see God in him and he wanted them to remember their relationship with him. He was their Savior. He was their God. He was their Master and Friend. They must

always remember this, especially in the time of hardship. When Jesus was with them, they had no problem. It seems that the disciples just stood there looking at Jesus with their mouths hanging open. Then Jesus climbed into the boat with them and the wind died down. The wind that had been so terrible and menacing and frustrating to them died down immediately in obedience to Jesus, the Creator God. All was calm and they could go to their destination with speed and power. When Jesus is with them, there is nothing to be afraid of; they have success and victory in the work of God.

III. Jesus expressed his power in love (53-56).

As soon as Jesus got into the boat, it reached the other side, landing at Gennesaret, just south of Capernaum. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. News spread like a wildfire through the whole region, and people ran to Jesus from everywhere. They carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. Perhaps they remembered the friends of the paralytic. Some may have carried their friends for a mile, others for five miles. Many were bringing the sick to Jesus through heroic sacrifices. Jesus went into villages, towns and throughout the countryside and wherever he went, people placed their sick in the marketplaces. They begged Jesus to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed. Many of them had learned “just touch” faith from the woman who had suffered from bleeding. The main point of this part is that Jesus expressed his love for all people by healing them. Jesus, the almighty God who walks on water and calms the winds, used his power to heal many sick people. Jesus is the Son of God who expresses his power in love to mankind.

In this passage we learned that Jesus trains his disciples in faith. Jesus wants them to realize that without him they can do nothing. But when he comes into the boat, they can go straight to the finish line. Jesus is our victory. Jesus is our Savior and the Son of God. Many of us are in the midst of struggles that seem like a stalemate. Let’s call out to Jesus for help in this time of need.