

Jesus walking on top of the turbulent waters of a stormy sea is surely one of Jesus' most iconic moments. The scene says: Jesus is able to do the miraculous, is miraculous - and it's also an assurance that Jesus is there, is present, especially when it's hard, a constant and protective force ready to reach out and catch us if we're falling. Presented like this, the remarkable, mysterious, and nature-defying power of Jesus can surely be a comforting idea. This story fragment has an almost fairytale-like quality, it's magical, and our hero ensures a happy ending.

But there's a lot more going on than that.

By the time we reach this story in Matthew's telling of the Gospel, the disciples have been with Jesus for quite a while. They've witnessed his healings, heard his teachings and they've seen him feed five thousand people from five loaves and two fish ... even though they've been with him through all that, seeing Jesus walk on top of the water towards them, in the middle of a storm, not unsurprisingly still blows their minds.

The disciples have been through a lot since Jesus called them to follow him. These folks have left everything they knew, they've turned their lives upside down, they've witnessed stuff that was surely very hard to make any sense of, it must have all been very stressful indeed. They'd traded the predictability of the life they knew, for a life together with Jesus, which was anything but predictable.

And so, I imagine the disciples, in this scene, stressed. They're exposed and vulnerable in the boat as its being tossed about, and then, with minds straining to understand what they're looking at, they see Jesus out on the water. I imagine them just wanting to curl up at this point, it's all gone a bit too far.

I imagine they'd much rather go back to a time when life was familiar, when reality was more ordinary, when things happened as they were expected to; back to a time when their entire worldview wasn't constantly being challenged by what Jesus was laying out in front of them.

But Peter doesn't do that.

Peter decides to step in to the strangeness. Peter says to Jesus that if it's really him they can see, then he should bring Peter out there with him – so Jesus does.

Peter took a risk, and it was surely terrifying; but because he did what he did, he, and his friends in the boat, can all now recognize Jesus for who he is, and they get to experience Jesus for what he is for them.

So what comes up for me in this story, is how come Peter took that risk?

What enabled Peter, despite the very real stress of the situation, to step outside his comfort zone and do something entirely unbelievable, do something that shouldn't even have been possible? Rather than backing away, Peter kept going, open to being changed by what he might experience.

It's tempting to think Peter was just braver than the others. Or tougher. Or just better. That way, if Peter is just an extraordinary human, it lets the rest of us off the hook. But Peter isn't extraordinary, he's just a person, he's just like us.

What Peter did, began with something we all share: faith in Jesus. And faith begins with trust.

Trust is confidence in something or someone because, over time, they've proved to be reliable, a person is who they say they are, they do the things they say they're going to do. Trust is the result of what is witnessed and experienced over and over again.

Faith is born from trust, they're connected. Faith is trust without proof, confidence despite uncertainty. Faith is a horizon pushing out in front of what we know, calling us on to continue the journey despite not knowing where we're going. Faith is our lived response to God's ever-present call.

Faith isn't something you can pick up or set down, it not like a hat you can put on whenever you want to wear it.

Faith develops within us – and it can also dwindle, or be forgotten, or lay dormant and unexplored.

We don't get faith, we grow in faith; so that our faith, our human response to the often miraculous truth of God, so that our faith might enable us to have life, and have it in abundance.

Much like a muscle is developed and strengthened through testing and regular use, and muscles enable us to live and move and do the things we might want to do, our faith, which is our trust, despite the uncertainty, in the constant saving presence of God in Christ, our faith can enable us to live fully and freely, live in a way that's progressively less limited by stress and by fear.

If I want to have strong muscles, I've got to use them by lifting heavy things. And, however weak or strong I might be, I'm going to have to start somewhere, test it out, practice, slowly develop my strength from wherever it is today, lift whatever I can, today, and add a little more weight next time.

It will be a commitment, it will need my attention, and I will have to practice regularly. I might want to be strong, but if I don't every lift anything heavy, whatever heavy is for me, if I never begin, if I don't practice, it's not going to happen.

Building strength, I'm going to need to keep going, keep increasing the weight, otherwise I'll get stuck. Comfortable and confident in what I know I can do, I will, eventually, get anxious, again, about doing anything that's outside my comfort zone, beyond what I know, what I think I'm capable of. Whatever my age, whatever my body can do today, I must keep testing and developing my strength by the way I choose to live, and practice, continuing to do a little more, a little more, continuing the process of my own transformation.

Faith, I think, is like that. Growing in faith is a commitment, it's a regular practice. Like choosing to build a muscle, building faith can also be a choice, it's something we can choose to do.

Peter sees Jesus, walking on water, and Peter, in the midst of the stress and anxiety of the situation, and despite being nervous, Peter leans in. Maybe his faith to that point has him prepared for what he's about to do, he surely senses that if he doesn't try, doesn't actually step outside of what he already knows, he'll never know how far his faith in the truth of Jesus can or will carry him.

So he tests his limit: he fixes his attention on Jesus, and he goes for it. And the combined power of Jesus' call and Peter's bold response, made possible by faith, does not disappoint.

Unlike the training of a muscle, growing in faith is not for us alone. Because of what Peter did, because of Peter's act of faith, his friends, too, are able to encounter the truth of Jesus in a whole new way, opening up possibilities for them, as well.

Like those disciples on the stormy sea, we are only too familiar with what it's like to feel vulnerable and stressed – and in response, we can want to stick with what's familiar, with what we know we know ... or, with our attention firmly fixed on Jesus, and responding to his call, we can test out doing something else, perhaps even something remarkable, perhaps something that shouldn't even be possible, test and grow our faith, and bring others along with us as we do it ... but to do that, we've also got to step out of the boat.