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## **Encounters with the Light of Christ**

### **IV. A Crazy Question**

#### **(Mark 4: 35-41)**

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

#### **I.**

It was a dark and stormy night. Jesus and his friends climbed on board an airplane. It wasn't a 747, you understand. It was just a little 10 seat KingAir Turboprop--like one you might rent or charter to fly from Aurora to McMinnville, if you had some strange reason to fly from Aurora to McMinnville. Peter, that know-it-all of Jesus' disciples, had a pilot's license, so he climbed into the cockpit. Jesus had a headache so he went to the back of the plane, put a pillow behind his neck and closed his eyes to rest.

They hadn't been airborne too long when they ran into some major turbulence. The plane started to rattle and shake and every now and then they'd hit an air pocket and drop a few hundred feet. Peter announced that they would be discontinuing beverage service. And all the other passengers, friends of Jesus, looked out the window and saw that they were in the middle of an ugly, thick cloud and that there was lightening all around. Thunder was booming and crashing on every side. They looked at each other and tried to smile. But the plane was bouncing them up and down better than any amusement park ride designed to terrify. And their smiles were

getting pretty sickly.

Just then, a huge bolt of lightening exploded by the wing and the plane dropped, **hard** and kept on dropping. It barreled and rolled and sputtered and went diving down. Stomachs flew up into throats. Faces drained of all color. Fingers dug into the armrests. Peter was yelling, “May day, may day, may day!” The whole plane was shaking and screaming down. The oxygen masks deployed and every passenger on board was trying to figure out how in heaven’s name to follow the instructions to put on the masks and “breathe normally.”

At this point, some of them turned their terrified faces to the back of the plane, to see Jesus. And they couldn’t believe their eyes. He was sleeping, his body shaking like all the rest of them but snoozing like a baby. And one of them screamed, “Master, don’t you care? Can’t you see we’re dying here?”

Jesus opened his eyes, looked calmly out the window and spoke to something out there. “Peace be still,” he said. Instantly the plane leveled off and the lightening vanished and the skies cleared and the plane began to rise smooth and clear; rise through the now calm and starry skies.

Jesus then turned to his friends. Their eyes were wide with astonishment. And he said to them, “Why are you such cowards? Do you still not trust me?” The word translated as faith in our scripture for today is the verb form of the Greek word for this relationship we have with Christ that we name faith. But in English there is no verb form of the word faith. The closest we have to the feeling of Christ’s question is the word trust. Jesus says, “Do you still not trust me?” And then he fluffed his pillow up and closed his eyes and went back to sleep, and left the disciples alone to look at each other with a new kind of fear in their eyes as they said, “Who is this...that even the sky listens to him?”

## II.

I want to assure all of you that I know that the Jesus who lived before Easter and the Resurrection never flew in an airplane. I know that you know that. I just wanted to make sure that you know I know that too. Jesus actually traveled in a boat that was caught in a storm. It was a boat that was sinking and the disciples, the friends of Jesus

were literally up to their necks in troubled waters--all the time he was asleep. I thought that it might be a stretch for some of us to conjure up the terror of being caught in a storm in a boat--unless, of course, you have seen the movie *The Perfect Storm* or make regular trips in bad weather on a boat of your own. But I bet all of us can pretty well imagine the white-knuckled terror of being in an airplane caught in a bad storm and going down.

You can be sure that the passengers who were with Jesus on that sinking boat were as terrified as you and I would be in a plane tumbling down. And they were just as amazed and in awe of a man in a sinking boat speaking peace to the sea as we would be amazed at a man in a falling plane speaking peace to the skies. In fact, they may have had reason to be even more amazed because they believed that storms at sea were the result of the raging of demons. They associated the sea itself with evil forces. Have you ever noticed that on ancient maps, there are sea dragons raging in the oceans? When the sea rose up in huge, ugly waves, the ancients felt the malignant furies of supernatural forces.

It's true, the Sea of Galilee, as they called it, isn't really a sea. It is a seven-mile-wide lake. But the waters in it are so deep and the mountains rise up around it so sharply at the shoreline that when the winds come down suddenly and hard, the waves that develop are enormous. And when those disciples heard the wind roaring and saw those waves piling up then the little boat would shoot up high and slide down so far into a trough that the waves would then tower over them and slam into them and crash over the boat and fill it up to sinking while they felt it **all** as demon fists beating against them and demon voices screaming in their ears and wishing them dead. They felt the water like cold fingers griping around them. And the sea itself was like the jaws of evil itself opening up to swallow them.

### III.

We think we've outgrown all that superstitious stuff. We know that a storm is not a demon but a low-pressure cell. The thing is, deep inside most of us, that ancient dread is still there. When real trouble starts crashing around us and the bottom of our lives drops out and we feel like we're falling; what we also feel is a terror of malignant

forces-evil forces-after us. And so, in southern California, in January of 1994 during the Northgate earthquake, the story is told of a three-year-old girl who prayed and begged God to stop shaking her house. She cried out to her mother, "Why is God so mad at us?"

In our adult minds, we may know better. But our little child hearts can still feel the grip of icy fear that this world is not safe and there are angry forces out there bent on getting us. Then we need someone to calm our stormy emotions and still our raging grief, to disarm the evil and speak to our deepest terrors: "Peace, be still," to the howling storms of our nights and our days that feel to us like monsters. We want someone who can quiet the demons within our souls and speak peace even upon those that terrify us most.

**And here is the great good news: we have someone who does!** Now, it doesn't always feel like that Someone responds as we'd like, when we'd like. Sometimes in the grip of our fear we feel like the disciples did-that maybe Jesus is asleep; that maybe God just doesn't care or doesn't see that we are in danger. There are times in our lives when we really can say with the disciples, "Lord, we are drowning here. Don't you care?" How many of you have ever known one of those times?

There they were, these friends of Jesus, fighting for their lives with all of their strength, doing everything they could to save that boat and to save their skins (and incidentally, Jesus' skin, too). And they looked around to see him and he was **asleep**, not helping with the oars; not lending a hand with the lines; not even helping bail water from the boat! He's in the back, stretched out, unconscious, and oblivious to their peril and their need!

"Master, don't you care that we are dying?"

#### **IV.**

You might think, in the first place, that having God in your boat would guarantee some smoother sailing. Having God as your pilot should provide pleasant skies for flying-right? Pleasant weather for the journey. And when you do the right thing and open yourself to the Holy and invite God in and go where God sends you; you'd expect

the Holy One of heaven to steer you clear of some of life's troubles. But it turns out not to be the case. Having God in our lives, guiding and encouraging, you and I meet the same nasty turbulence and storms as everybody else. The truth is, Jesus had sent his disciples right into that storm. So, knowing the Holy One of the universe doesn't get you steered clear of life's storms.

With that disappointment under our belts, we might think, in the second place that, at the very least, when the trouble comes we could feel Christ working with us, fighting for us. But no, not always. During parts of some of the storms it may seem for all the world to us like God is fast asleep. And we are fighting and struggling all by ourselves.

“Master, don't you care?”

I have heard men and women of faith, of deep and profound faith, at the darkest moments of their struggle, crying out the questions:

- “Where is God in all of this?”
- “God, don't you care that my beloved one is suffering?”
- “God, why aren't you answering my prayers? I'm scared. I'm tired of struggling in a way that feels like I'm all by myself.”
- “Master, don't you care?”

The truth **is** that Jesus himself turned to heaven for help in the ugliest storm of his own suffering. And the Holy power he called upon for help seemed to be asleep.

- “My God why?” He said. “Why have you forsaken me?”
- Why do bad things happen to good people?

Because the world has an amazingly complex and powerful traffic pattern and God is not an airport traffic controller, managing all our lives throughout the world in order to make certain we go only when we should. Some of us are determined to go off-course and others, while they remain faithful to the best flight plan they can imagine, find themselves crashing into those who refuse to follow any plan. Let me make clear, our God of many names is never named the Indifferent or Capricious One. God's majesty, by God's good grace is to be in every moment of our lives, even when we think God is asleep.

And yet we feel what we feel when we feel abandoned and join Jesus himself in feeling it. He shows us we may pray even our worst fears and doubts and questions to God, though why we feel them remains a mystery, an existential mystery; sometimes an infuriating mystery; sometimes a mystery to break the heart. We cannot avoid this fact of life's experience, that in some of our most desperate struggles, the power of God seems to be asleep; that some of life's storms are not quieted, even when we most need to hear a word of divine peace.

This story from scripture seems to suggest that the Holy One of heaven can be like a sleeping power beside us. Not an absence, but sometimes a very silent presence. Not uncaring, but willing to trust us with the struggle for a while, serenely knowing that love will conquer in the end. The story also says that the sleeping power can be awakened! They did cry to him and he was not deaf to their cries. He was moved and he spoke: "Peace," he said. "Be still." And the miracle for me is not that he calms just winds and waves in the storms of our lives. The miracle is that he can calm our terrified hearts. "Peace, be still."

- I've listened to a woman in the spiritual battle of her life, dying a slow and painful death, saying, "God has given me peace." And I can see in her eyes that it is true.
- I've sat with a man in late middle age who has been without work for months, frustrated at every turn and with every reason to be bitter as one who'd given the best years of his life to a company that casually let him go. I've heard him saying almost in disbelief, shaking his head, "But I'm at peace. God has given me peace." And I could see in his face that it was true.

Sometimes the storm itself **is** tamed. Miraculously the crisis itself abates. The winds and the waves of suffering stop beating at us. And the little boat of our lives, the little boat of our family or our job is saved. And we're full of gratitude and wonder. But sometimes the storm itself rages much longer and takes our boat down. And a dream is lost, or a job, or life on this earth. Even here, even in this, God can grant the gift of calm. I've seen it in the faces and the words of the dying and of the ones left behind. I have heard it even in the voices of the ruined: "Peace, peace. It is well with my soul."

And whenever I see it, I am overwhelmed with a sense of reverence and awe. And I am moved to ask, "Who is this who speaks even to the dying and the grieving and the ruined, 'Peace be still,' and they hear and find peace!"

Now I know, I am not naive, I know that when the boat of your life is rising and falling and rocking and tossing you up and dropping you down hard, there will be days when you hardly feel at peace. What you mostly feel is seasick. And it's all you can do to hang on.

But near to us, nearer than we know, not outside the tempest, but inside it with us is the one who can speak to the storm and to the heart, "Peace, be still." The Holy One of heaven is right beside us and has the power and the authority to astonish the heart with what the Zen masters call a Oneness with the Universe and what Christ calls the gift of peace. Ask for it. Cry for it. Wait for it--impatiently wait. Show God the storm of your heart and of your spirit and ask God, "Master, do you care?" Then hear the very voice of God say, "Peace be still." Let your own raging heart be commanded like the sea. Let it obey. "Peace, I give you. My peace I leave with you. Peace, be still.