

June 20, 2021
Mark 4:35-41

Pentecost 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Other Side”

“On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’”

Howard Krausche Field is my high school’s home field, the sight of many memorable football games and marching band performances. The field is divided into the home and visitor areas, both on opposite sides of the field, with little contact between fans of the opposing teams. As a band member, I attended every football game for my four years of high school, but never had I ventured near the visitor seats until my cousin Gail, who attended one of the high schools we played, told me that she would be at the game and wanted to introduce me to some of her friends. As much as I love my cousin, I was reluctant at first to cross over into “enemy territory,” a place where no student at North Plainfield High School would want to venture. But to my surprise, I walked over to the “other side,” and even though I got some dirty looks from the Watchung Hills fans (since I was wearing my North Plainfield band uniform) I had a nice visit with Gail and her friends and watched a part of the game from a very different perspective. I do not think that I ever went over to the visitors’ stands again, but that day I overcame my fear of leaving the home stands and crossing over to the “other side.”

There are times when going across to the “other side” is as simple as my walk across the football field; but there are also times when leaving home and going into unfamiliar territory can be frightening or dangerous. There are places in the world where borders are fortified to keep the peace between warring nations, and the thought of crossing over to the “other side” can be viewed as an act of treason. Racial and economic inequality has resulted in many communities divided by invisible but very real borders (such as the “red lines” that separated communities where I grew up), and we were taught not to cross over these boundaries lest we fall into danger. The community where I served my seminary internship was divided along ethnic lines, with each community virtually isolated from each other; it was almost like *West Side Story* when a man and woman from each community fell in love. Robert Frost may have written that *“something there is that doesn’t love a wall,”* but we live in a world that is filled with barriers and boundaries that keep people separated from one another, and the mere thought of crossing over to the “other side” is unthinkable.

Today's Gospel lesson continues Mark's account of Jesus' teaching ministry in which "*with many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*" (4:34). Jesus now continues his preaching and teaching ministry; but he surprises his disciples when "*on that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'*" (4:35). The "other side" is the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee, the body of water with which many of his disciples would have been well-acquainted; but it was also a place where few of them would have dared to enter. The "other side" of the Sea of Galilee represents Gentile territory ("*the other side of the lake, the country of the Gerasenes*" – 5:1), the home of people who were outsiders to Jesus' people, people with whom the people of Israel had no contact. The disciples may have fished the waters of the Sea of Galilee but had probably never set foot on the opposite shore, on the "other side" where the Gentiles lived. This is Jesus' first foray into what might be considered a dangerous, even inappropriate destination; but it is also an indication that Jesus Christ is truly Lord of all. Jesus' venture to the "other side," into such a foreign region across the sea is a deliberate demonstration of his claim that his mission extends beyond his own people, "*so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" (Philippians 2:10-11).

- "By carrying his ministry into Gentile territory, Jesus reaches out to the strangers, the others, even the enemies of the house of Israel ... The Gospel Jesus proclaims and demonstrates represents good news for all, transcending the human characteristics we use to separate ourselves from others." – Beverly Zink-Sawyer.

Mark does not report on the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' plan to cross over to the "other side"; he merely states that "*leaving the crowd behind, he took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.*" (4:36). But they must have quickly regretted their decision to join him, because soon "*a great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.*" (4:37). Given the fact that at least four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their terror indicates the severity of the incident. But there is one person on the boat who is apparently unconcerned about the prospect of being overtaken by the raging waters: Jesus "*was in the stern, asleep on the cushion*" (4:38). This seeming lack of interest or concern infuriates the disciples; when they awaken Jesus, they accuse him of being indifferent to their plight: "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" The tone of their

accusation parallels the story of Jonah, where the captain charges the prophet with not caring about the fate of those on the ship: “*The captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’*” (Jonah 1:6). But what the terrified disciples do not realize is that Jesus’ ability to sleep in the back of the boat amid the raging storm is not an indication of his apathy or lack of concern for their safety, but a sign of his complete confidence in God, a confidence that is also expressed in the faith of Jesus’ people:

- “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.” – Psalm 4:8.
- “If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked; for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.” – Proverbs 3:24-26.

But Jesus’ calm amid the raging storm is not only an indication of his trust in God but a sign that is truly what the church confesses him to be: “*Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.*” He does not respond directly to the disciples, neither assuring them of his concern for their safety nor encouraging them to trust in the Lord. Instead, “*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.*” (4:39). The image of Jesus calming a storm recalls the Old Testament image of God as the victor in combat with the forces of chaos:

- “Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves.” – Psalm 107:23-25.

Jesus has God’s power to still the storm; the complete calm that follows Jesus’ command to the sea and wind leaves no doubt about his power to do so. As God had authority over the primeval chaos at the creation, so Jesus has authority over the forces of nature that threaten God’s people.

Once the storm has been calmed, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them “*why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*” (4:40). Faith in Mark means in part a recognition that Jesus is Christ and Son of God (“*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” 1:1). Here faith means primarily the trust which the

disciples lacked when they feared for their lives and cried out in panic. *“In order to transcend fear, the disciples must recognize that Jesus is not a human being with unusual abilities to preach, heal, and exorcise. They must recognize that Jesus is the Son of God.”* (Pheme Perkins). The disciples continue their journey with Jesus to the “other side” *“filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”* (4:41). Since only God could control the wind and sea, the disciples’ question carries an implicit confession of Jesus’ divinity that will be explicitly stated by Peter when he declares that *“you are the Messiah, the son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16).

This story is incorporated into the Gospel of Mark to nurture trust in Jesus Christ amid stress and persecution. Mark’s story addresses a community of believers in Jesus Christ who, in the guise of the disciples, are challenged to trust Jesus when they face the storms of oppression and persecution of which Jesus warned his disciples:

- “... they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name ... You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” – Luke 21:12-19.

This story is also a sign that Jesus’ followers in all generations will be challenged to “cross over” into new and uncharted territory. As Jesus crossed over from his ministry among his people on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory on the other side of the lake, so will his followers be called on to bring his Gospel to the “other side.” His parting words to his disciples are that *“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8), and the acts of the apostles in the early days of the church’s ministry is to bring the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to places that were on the “other side,” across borders that were never crossed and to people and places where they never would have imagined being called. But if Jesus Christ truly is “Lord of all,” and if *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life”* (John 3:16), then those who are faithful to Jesus’ call must get in the boat with him and journey to the “other side,” knowing that whatever perils and challenges we may face will always be in the presence of Jesus who *“charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease, sings music to the sinner’s ears, brings life and health and peace”* (ELW Hymn 886). The Church that is called to journey with our Lord to the “other side” will soon discover

what one of those disciples in that terror-filled boat realized when he was called to go to the “other side,” into the house of an enemy soldier, so that he might proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people of *all* nations:

- “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’” – Acts 10: 34-43.

These fifteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic have seemed like a stormy ordeal in which we have often been filled with terror of being swamped by this unknown and insidious virus. There has been great uncertainty as to how long the storm will last, how many victims it will claim, and even if we will make it safely through this maelstrom to a safe harbour. But our voyage across this stormy sea has also been in the presence of the one who is truly our Lord and Saviour, the one who has promised to be with us always, “*even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20), the embodiment of the blessed assurance that “*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23). As we look with hope toward a possible end of this ordeal and a calming of the storm in which we have lived for so long, we may wonder what awaits us on the “other side” of this experience. How will our personal and family lives be changed? What will the long-lasting consequences of the pandemic be, and how will they impact our community, nation, and world? What will it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ in a post-pandemic world? As Jesus’ disciples faced new challenges and opportunities when they arrived on the other shore of the Sea of Galilee, what challenges and opportunities will be encounter when we end up on the “other side”? While we have no certainty what our future will hold for us or what we may face in this new era, we do have the assurance that our Lord is with us and will use this time to continue to work that began with our ancestors in faith as they journey with Jesus through the stormy seas so that the Word of eternal life that is ours in our Lord and Saviour may be a word of life, light, and hope for people on all sides, in all times and in all places.

- “This much, therefore, we may conclude with *confidence*: the Church that is enabled to endure the suffering of those who follow Jesus Christ into earth’s

uncertain future will itself have a future. Willing to lose its life for his sake who lost his life for the world's sake, it will find its life. And however insignificant and inglorious that life may appear in comparison with all that our imperial Christian past has conditioned us to consider, it will be ... *exceptional!*" – Douglas John Hall.

I may never have crossed over to the other side of Howard Krausche Field, but there have been many occasions in which I have been called to cross over barriers and boundaries that I previously had been taught not to cross, that my own fears and uncertainties had prevented me from going over. It has often led me into new and uncomfortable situations, but these experiences have been moments of blessing for me and opportunities to share Christ's love and serve in Jesus' name. I am thankful that our Lord gave me the courage and guided me to overcome my fears and cross over to what had once been the "other side," because it helped me to realize that in the eyes of God there **is no other side!** God does not look upon us as a divided people organized in an "us vs. them" world. In Jesus Christ, God has created "*one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace*" (Ephesians 2:15). As in our baptism into Christ we have been clothed with Christ, therefore "*there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28). In the Kingdom of God that our Lord Jesus Christ proclaims, there are no boundaries, barriers, or walls; there is no "other side." Christ invites us to cross over with him, to trust in his powerful presence no matter how rough the seas may be or how great the storm of opposition may threaten us, so that we can cross over to those who once were on the "other side" so that all might be on the **same side**, united in Christ as one holy people, called to proclaim that in all corners of the world there "*one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

So come, let us go across to the "other side" – so that all may know that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God's love is for everyone, that wherever we may be we may rejoice because God is on our side and that there are no other sides for those who have been joined together as the one Church that is the body of Christ.

Amen.