



**First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield**  
**429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330**  
*Creating Community, Welcoming All*

**Sermon June 20, 2021 Sermon “Re-Awakening Our Faith in Sea Crossings” Rev. David Jones**

Richard Pree, someone I have so often turned to (who many of us have so often turned to), told a few of us that had gathered on Thursday night to discuss this reading from Mark, a story of being given the unexpected task of sailing on his own, overnight in the darkness, while his captain would go down into the cabin to get some much needed sleep. Richard had not been explicitly prepared for this, the captain had never warned Richard as someone still just learning, never having handled this vessel on his own, that he would suddenly be expected to handle *everything* on his own--and in the dead of night. But the captain trusted Richard completely, even if Richard hadn't the faintest idea why.

Well, with the captain sleeping soundly, things were going along alright. But then Richard noticed white lights on the horizon ahead. As Richard explained to us, his boat was traveling way out on the sea at this point, it wasn't possible that these were lights on a shore. The lights had to be something out there on the sea with them. And the funny thing about these white lights, they were getting brighter, and bigger...and they seemed to be coming straight at Richard.

The captain had left Richard at the helm, the captain *needed* to sleep. Richard told himself that he could figure this out...but the lights were definitely getting closer. It seemed like the boats were on a dangerous collision course. Richard decided to play it safe; he would wake up the captain. The captain was friendly enough about this interruption to his sleep. He came up right up on the deck to investigate. But as soon as he got there, he seemed to draw a big breath and let out a deep sigh. And then he gently explained to Richard how the lights of a big ship work.

If the ship is coming toward you, if it *is* on a dangerous course in relation to your smaller vessel, you will see the ship's lights as red or green; if you're seeing red or green, you know you are in the ship's path. But white lights, the captain continued, shine backward, astern of the ship. "What color are the light's on that ship, Richard?" the captain asked. Well, they're white, Richard said. The captain patted Richard sympathetically on the shoulder, and went straight back to sleep. It was not a big ship on a dangerous collision course with their sailboat, but a big ship moving very slowly--and easily avoided--up ahead of them. Crisis averted.

Today in the Gospel according to Mark we find Jesus and the disciples loading into a boat in the evening for a journey across the Sea of Galilee. All day they have been together as Jesus taught the masses gathered along the shore about this thing, this place that Jesus calls the kingdom of God. Jesus chose to deliver these teachings from a boat, addressing his audience gathered on the shore. To me this suggests that what Jesus has been doing and saying is not only spiritual but practical: it is just what we need to witness and to learn before we join Jesus in the boat. Everything that Jesus is doing is to prepare us for a journey, and here in this passage we learn a little more about where that journey is going and what it will take to get there. And today we learn that Jesus is content to sleep for the journey, and content to trust the disciples to handle the rowing.

The last time we were gathered together here in the sanctuary, I was still working at the hospital, still doing overnight on call shifts. And I remember one time, late in the evening, I called my educator at her home. A situation was developing that I found totally overwhelming, and I was beginning to doubt that I could handle it on my own. I had more faith in her than I had in myself, so finally I called her. Just like the

captain did with Richard, our educator threw her student chaplains right into the deep end. I remember my classmates and I really couldn't believe just how suddenly she entrusted us to this enormous responsibility. We were fearful that rather than serve patients well we might instead do real harm--that we would find ourselves on our own dangerous collision course.

Anyway, I panicked a little bit this one night and I called my educator. She didn't seem to mind the interruption. And like the captain, she drew a deep breath and did a little teaching just over the phone. And I went right back to work, and she went right back to sleep. And the family I was there for--we made it across the rough waves of that night together.

Richard's captain, and my educator, though they were trying to sleep, they were somehow there with us, just like Jesus with the disciples, sleeping on his cushion in the stern. And somehow, miraculously, these teachers do have the power to proclaim peace in the face of a dangerous storm. And they trust us so suddenly, and so completely, because they know that when we become afraid, when we need them most, we will have the courage to wake them up. They trust us before we think they should, before we have earned their trust, because they know something we do not; that we already have all that we need within us, even if that is just knowing when to ask for help.

This is the Sunday after Juneteenth, celebrating that great day in the midst of the second American revolution when the slaves in America were officially emancipated. And it happens that our reading from Mark is actually about our common destiny to be free from slavery and oppression. You see, the gospel writer--and Jesus by his actions--are intentionally reminding us with this passage of Moses and the sea crossing of the Hebrews out of Egypt. Jesus is showing that he now stands where Moses once did; he too intends to lead the people to a new freedom from the national and economic oppression they were suffering under Rome.

Because that is the purpose of faith, to bring about freedom for all God's children. That is why Jesus teaches. That is the reason he teaches all day long in a boat in the sea; it is unmistakable that he is preparing us for a journey across it to a new kind of community. Faith begins on this side of the sea, where we are not yet free. And as we come to understand the ancient purpose of faith, that is when we as creatures can take that next step of getting into the boat and setting sail. And Jesus--with his magnificent faith, like any good teacher--will come along with us. Because the cause of freedom is very difficult. It was opposed by Pharaoh, it was opposed by the Romans, it was opposed by the Confederacy, it is opposed by the inequality that we have seen laid bare during this pandemic. But even as we become afraid in the face of this opposition--in the face of terrible winds and violent waves--even as we become intimidated, as we begin to doubt, our faith sleeps peacefully next to us in the boat. All we have to do is have the courage to wake it up.

The experience of faith is nothing other than the discovery of our true selves, as creatures stamped by the Creator, alive here in bodies while also existing beyond them. Faith is the Way that that gentle, precocious, childlike divine spark--the delicate piece of God that we each uniquely possess--learns to row through life's hard storms. And there is a sadness and a tragic quality about this journey, because it is so difficult for that small, quarantined piece of God's almighty being to understand who or what it has become now that it is given to one body, and to one life here on earth. I think Jesus is reacting to this sadness when he expresses frustration that the disciples were so afraid. Their fear is perfectly reasonable. Our fears usually are. But that's really sad, that that is part of this life too.

And so this magnificent thing--living in each of us--must rediscover our true selves. Each of us must learn that we are not some isolated, confined creature, lost in a big world, but are rather an equal part in the vast divine that all of us together make manifold. If God had a body, it would not be any one of us. Instead it *is* all of us -- and the trees, and the waves of the sea, and it is the wind that sends our boats into chaotic motion and sometimes frightens us. But we only have a good reason to be afraid when we haven't quite yet pieced God together; when we haven't quite realized that the winds that beat against us are only waking us up to the truth of our existence--that by faith we are each of us a part of the glory, destined not for perishing at sea but for the freedom and the eternal life that lies across it.

Alleluia and amen.