



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

No Coward Soul is Mine

By the Rev. Sharon Gracen

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I've never felt that I had much to say about the story of Jesus walking on water. I remember just before I went to Israel in 1999 that some over-zealous entrepreneur was planning to install a plexi-glass platform just below the surface of the Sea of Galilee, so people could get the full Jesus experience. It seemed ridiculous to me; what spiritual wisdom could anyone get from that? As always, these stories require something more probing than, "Wow, how did he do that?", and instead, "What is this telling us about him and us?" To my understanding, this story exists to answer the question, "Who is this Jesus?" From this miraculous ability to walk through the storm, we see that he is a cosmic power, obeyed by the elements and apparently the laws of physics. The source of his authority is not worldly, not from the Temple or the empire. But I'm never really sure how this story helps me grow spiritually.

So I find myself identifying with Simon Peter, the bumbler, here. He really believes in Jesus. He has felt his power; he has seen its effects on the blind, the lame, the sick and the hungry. And so he assumes that his belief in Jesus changes everything, even the laws of physics. Only to discover that his faith, though wicked strong, hasn't turned him into something that he is not. Perhaps he misidentified the object or purpose of his faith, being seduced by grand events and miracles and all that he might be able to do. Perhaps the extraordinary that he seeks, is not how his path will unfold. His extraordinary will be different.

Emily Brontë was a part of a rather extraordinary family, and by that I mean, out of our ordinary experience. She and her five siblings were preacher's kids. Their father was an Anglican priest who was widowed and never remarried. His sister-in-law helped to raise the children. The two eldest girls both died within weeks of each from tuberculosis contracted at a miserable boarding school. They were 10 and 11 years old. Eventually, all of the Brontë siblings would die of respiratory ailments, outlived by their father.

Emily, her older sister Charlotte and younger sister Ann were all published authors. Their works were originally published under male pseudonyms, because, well, women just weren't published at that time. Charlotte Brontë gave the world *Jane Eyre* and Ann Brontë wrote what is considered one of the first feminist novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Emily Brontë stunned Victorian England with *Wuthering Heights*. This shy, introverted woman wove a story of deep and dangerous passion on the moors, shot through with disappointment and cold revenge. The story of Cathy and Heathcliff has become a timeless classic, always in my minds

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

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eye, played by Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier. Today's poem was written just before *Wuthering Heights* and perhaps in it we hear of a faith that abides at a level beyond the events of life and religion - like the wild passionate and timeless commitment of Heathcliff and Cathy. Here is her poem.

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from fear.

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest,
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee.

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

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Peter foundering in the waves and Emily Brontë's courageous soul invite us to examine where our faith resides and what challenges it. Peter so wanted to be as capable as Jesus of this maritime miracle, but his doubts and fears said, "Are you crazy? What if you fail, you'll drown?", and down he went. Peter thought the miracle was to stay on top of the water, but instead I believe that it is to remain still and steady, in peace, in the midst of the storm, not try to conquer it.

Rachel Held Evans is an important voice in Christianity today, and she wrote this about today's Gospel,

I know this fear—the fear of chaos, of evil, of death. It arrives unexpectedly and unwelcome, often just after I've made some great declaration of faith and convinced myself I'm in control. I've climbed out of the boat, put one foot in front of the other, and then suddenly realized the foolishness of the whole enterprise, the forces we're all up against in this scary world. They're dropping bombs in Iraq now, and I know I'm supposed to be against that, but the alternative seems just as dangerous, just as awful. The cycle of violence, fear, and hate continues, on and on—only the word **cycle** doesn't quite seem to fit, does it? It's too neat, too orderly, too predictable. **It seems more like chaos, like an unleashed sea.**

Now, I don't want to burden you with too much information about my health and blood clots and such, but I have learned so much during this time that I don't think I am meant to keep it to myself. This past couple of weeks has seemed like chaos to me. I have a deep abiding faith in our nature as spiritual beings having this physical, human experience. I believe in the power of our spiritual nature, our consciousness, and particularly our thoughts to affect our physical condition. The more we are able to root out negative thoughts and emotions, the healthier we are. The more we hold on to them, particularly if we ignore their presence, the more mischief they will do in our bodies. I count on this and it is how I generally keep myself healthy. And then my body knocked me down and I have spent the last two weeks, challenging the doubts and fear of what has seemed like chaos. It has required me to get out of the boat and be willing sink down to find what was lurking under the surface. If I just rely on blood thinners to make the changes, I will not be healed. They certainly help with the symptoms, but my healing comes from a different source, in a different. Like Peter, I have been impatient, fearfully pitting my skills against the chaos in my blood. That I haven't managed to affect an instantaneous recovery has felt like failure and therefore screaming proof of my imperfection. This unattainable myth of perfection, perfect priest, perfect wife, perfect mother, perfect woman, has been exposed as an unnecessary and dangerous quest. Pursuing this perfection is worse than a waste of time; it is a waste of my life. So I am grateful to my body for having said, now is the time to stop this nonsense, let go of your fear of being imperfect and more forward trusting, indeed knowing that you are loved unconditionally. Thank you all for being a part of that message.

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Ms. Bronté talks about faith at its largest level, not in the words we use to describe it. She is fairly harsh on creeds, as "unutterably vain" and "worthless as withered weeds." The faith she describes resides at a place that is safe from human heartbreaks, disappointments, failures and imperfection. Her description of how God's spirit works is powerful. It " animates eternal years, Pervades and broods above, Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears" This is faith with a long term view. It supercedes the chaos around and within us. It is a faith immune to fear. I am grateful to Emily Bronté courageous soul for refocusing my faith, from what I accomplish to how little my accomplishments or lack thereof define me to God. I'm working on it.

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