Last Sunday, Rev. Mary had a few of us act out the aftermath of the feeding of five thousand people with two fishes and five loaves of bread. We—Jo, Frank and I—portrayed three disciples, who were exhausted after feeding so many with so little. We acted amazed to even have leftovers in our breadbaskets. We had seen a miracle.

Today’s reading from Matthew follows last week’s passage, when we were told that Jesus wanted to be alone; because the day had started with the terrible news that John the Baptist had been killed at the hands of King Herod. Jesus had wanted nothing more than to be alone and pray and allow himself to mourn his very dear friend. He’d stepped in a boat that morning to find some quiet. But the people didn’t leave him alone and followed him on the shores around the Sea of Galilee. Now that he had fed them all and healed the sick, he told his disciples to get back in the boat and go ahead to the other side of the sea. And he dismissed the crowds. Then he went up the mountain to pray. Alone at last.

It was night now and the boat with the disciples was battered by a sudden storm. They couldn’t make any headway, because the wind was against them. They found themselves in the middle of the night at a distance of at least three miles from shore. High waves rocked their boat. It was pretty scary and, as you might expect, they were afraid. Suddenly, they saw a figure walk toward them over the water. Now they were even more afraid. “It’s a ghost!” one of them cried. But then Jesus spoke to them and they recognized his voice. “Do not be afraid, it is I,” he said.

Peter wasn’t quite sure. He wanted to test the situation. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water toward Jesus. After a few steps, a burst of wind whipped up the waves. Peter panicked and promptly started to sink. “Lord, save me!” he cried. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, but he said to Peter, “Why did you have doubt? Have you little faith?”

So, here you have it: fear – doubt – faith – miracle.
To get to the deeper meaning of this passage, we have to momentarily suspend with the law of nature. Some things *float* on water, like oil or pine needles. But walk on water without some sort of man-made machine? No! We are too steeped in a culture that puts science on a pedestal, to argue that point. This Bible passage has little to do with the laws of nature. It has to do with the priorities in the Kingdom of God, where *faith, love, trust, compassion and justice* are the pillars.

It sounds so simple, doesn’t it? *Love your neighbor as you love yourself.* Trust in God. *Let faith ward off your doubt.*

But we know only too well how things get in the way of having full faith all the time. Faith is not a possession. It is an activity – like a song that disappears when we stop singing. We have to work at it, because we often live in fear, and fear begets doubt.

Paul Tillich, a prominent theologian from the last century, said that “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”

Initially, Peter believed in Jesus’ power to save him, but when the wind picked up, he panicked and became fearful, and sure enough, he started to sink. But Jesus grabbed him and scolded him: “You of little faith! Why did you doubt?”

Have you ever had a bad dream in the middle of the night at some point in your life? Some sort of monster is after you and you wake up in a sweat? You want nothing more than to call out to someone you know well. Your mother hears you hollering and dashes into your room and holds you tight. You believe her, when she says there is no monster in your room, because you trust her. When you were even littler, your father would throw you up in the air and you trusted he would catch you. Completely and unconditionally. This is how it works with Jesus. To have faith means that you trust Jesus will stand by you in the dark of night, when you are twisting and turning and cannot sleep, because you are afraid of something. Maybe you worry because you made a terrible mistake and don’t know how to resolve it; or you wonder how to pay for this month’s bills. Whatever. You think you are all alone… Maybe, you’re not.

For those of you, who have read Winnie the Pooh – remember that wonderful bear with so many friends? Like little Piglet? Well, one day, little piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. “Pooh,” he whispered. “Yes Piglet?” “Nothing” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s hand. “I just wanted to be sure of you.”
I can identify with that story. We all can. When something threatens us, we reach for someone who we hope can protect us. During the war, I always sidled up to my mother. She gave me complete confidence, even as the bullets flew around our house, because I believed she would take care of me. Maybe, at that moment, when we hovered in the hallway of our house, waiting for the soldiers to move on, the hand of Jesus was on her. That’s how it felt to me. Whatever would happen, I would be safe, because she felt safe.

Maybe, that is what Rev. Mary meant when she put together today’s bulletin and gave the sermon she had in mind its title: “Stop, Look, and Listen.” Even when you feel alone or terribly frightened, Jesus might be walking toward you. Stop and Listen for his footsteps!

It is a gift to have trust. It is a gift to believe. In the time that Jesus lived, people had the advantage of seeing him perform miracles. Even so, some people were stunned by the things he did, but they didn’t necessarily believe him. They were skeptical and cynical. They would rather crown him King than to have to follow his teachings, because some of those teachings were tough. To love your neighbor like yourself...how easy is that? To believe in the Kingdom of God, the way Jesus preached about it, was a step they couldn’t take, for to have faith is to have wings, and to believe in the saving power of Jesus means taking risk.

When a father throws up his son in the air, the young child takes a risk. It delights in the risk. It expects to be caught. It doesn’t question. Its faith has wings. As adults we want to take reasonable risks. We’ve learned there are dangers. To expect Jesus to catch us after we jump off the Empire State Building is unreasonable. That’s not the kind of miracle we should expect. But when we are at the end of our rope with no place to go, no way to solve our dilemma, that’s when we should take the risk, that’s when we should have the courage to lift up our worries, our anxieties, our unresolved dilemmas and ask to be rescued.

Faith – wings – courage – grace – forgiveness – doubt – risk – prayer. These things can be part of our daily lives.

May we all be risk takers, so we can see Jesus walk toward us over the Sea of Galilee. Amen.