Why do we doubt?

Today the Gospel begins with Jesus dismissing the crowds and then sending his disciples out on a boat to go across the lake on their own while he goes up a mountain.

The wind was against the disciples so their boat could not cross and remained far from land through the night. In the dark early morning hours, Jesus decides to come help them and walks on water to get to them. As Jesus nears the boat, the disciples catch sight of him… but they can't make out that it is Jesus and since no human being can walk on water they conclude that they are seeing a ghost and become frightened… Jesus senses their panic and fear and shouts over the wind and crashing waves… "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter yells back, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

And Jesus responds, "come."

So Peter leaps out of the boat without thinking, full of faith, his eyes fixed on Jesus and he walks with ease across the water toward Jesus. He is like an athlete focused on winning a game, nothing distracts him until he accomplishes his goal, but once he gets to Jesus, he suddenly notices a gust of wind blow across his path and realizes the extent of what is happening.. he is standing on water, not ground, water. He begins to panic and as fear washes over him he starts sinking into the water and cries out to Jesus, "Lord save me!" The text tells us that Jesus **immediately** grabs his hand and catches him, pulls him up out of the water and then says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

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Why did Peter suddenly begin to doubt himself, doubt the miracle, doubt Jesus?
……Why did he doubt?…… Why do any of us doubt?

Kevin Cokley is a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan who studies doubt… Dr. Cokley was hired on as a professor at 29 and when he stepped foot on campus for the first time as a professor, he was filled with self-doubt. He looked at all of the other faculty and saw how many articles and even books they had published and wondered if he really deserved to be there. He went on to study self-doubt and has produced many publications and has become one the leading experts on the subject of self-doubt. Yet even with all his success, his publications, speaking engagements, and accolades, even as he studies self-doubt, he still doubts himself. He explains that he is so full of doubt that he has to google himself to remember that he is not a fraud and that he has been successful and knows some things.

Today in our scripture, we see Peter similarly full of doubt. He was just a poor fisherman who could barely make ends meet. He was not famous. He wasn't a leader. He was a poor working man and now he is one of the Messiah's closest friends. He helps keep thousands of people at bay as they gather to listen to Jesus. He has seen Jesus turn water into wine and feed five thousand with just five loaves and two fish, but he watched all those from afar… now in this moment he was the miracle. He was standing on water with Jesus… How could this be? He was just a fisherman who spent his life inside a boat staring at the water, hoping for fish, and now he is walking on top of the water with the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

I imagine the gust of wind that came across his path must have brought him right back to his days as a fisherman. He felt the gust of wind and instinctively look up at his sail only to be reminded that he was not in a boat, but instead he, a lowly fisherman, was somehow standing on water with Jesus the Messiah…. and <u>in that moment</u> he doubted himself and he doubted Jesus…

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Why do we doubt ourselves like this? We all do it. Kevin Cokley resists the name “Imposter syndrome” and instead calls it imposter phenomenon because he says that syndrome makes it sound like a pathology that we have only when we are mentally unwell, but he argues that feeling like an imposter, feeling doubt is something we all experience because it often helps us.

He explains that when we lived outside as hunters and gatherers, we were more likely to survive if we doubted the sound of the rustling leaves. If we doubted that it was just the wind and thought instead… I wonder if that is a panther, we were more likely to survive.

Now in our modern age, doubt doesn’t just keep us away from panthers, it actually fuels our success and it can help us make more prudent, self-reflective judgements.

When Kevin arrived on campus for the first time as a professor and began to doubt himself, he could either have become depressed, defeated and given up or he could have tried to prove that he belonged there. He talks about how his doubt in many ways fueled his drive to succeed.

Michele Obama, the first lady of the United States for 8 years felt similarly. In an interview she asked the question, “Am I good enough?” She went on to explain, “That is a question that has dogged me for a good part of my life. Am I good enough to have all of this, am I good enough to be the first lady of the United States? I think that many women and many young girls of all backgrounds walk around with that question. I still feel on some level that I have something to **prove**.”

Michele Obama still feels she has something to prove…

Tom Hanks, world-famous actor expressed a similar feeling. He said, ”no matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done, there comes a point when you think, how did I get here and am I going to be able to continue this. When are they going to discover that in fact I am a fraud and take everything away from me…” He said, “There are days when I know that at 3’oclock tomorrow afternoon I am going to have to deliver some degree of emotional goods and if I can’t do it, that means I’m going to have to fake it and if I fake it that means they may catch me at faking it and if they catch me at faking it.. well then it’s just dooms day.”

No matter how amazingly successful we are, we still feel doubt and continue to feel the need to prove ourselves and in many ways this feeling can drive our ongoing success…

Doubt is a normal part of life.. It can make us question our very own abilities such that we have to remind ourselves of what we are capable of with a daily google search, or another packed arena of fans, or another Oscar…

And if it is normal for Tom Hanks to doubt whether or not he can act, something he has done quite successfully for his entire life, how much more normal is it to doubt the supernatural transformation from being a poor fisherman to being a disciple walking on water with the Messiah. Peter's doubt was so normal… Our doubt is so normal…

And so how does Jesus respond to Peter's doubt…

I like to think that Jesus is not mad at Peter when he says, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt".. I like to think that Jesus must have been smiling when he said that to Peter just like a Father might smile when helping his child go down a slide for the first time and says, "don't be afraid. It's so fun." The child is full of doubt that this will all come out okay, but the father knows that all will be fine at the other end. I think that Jesus had this parental joy in his heart because he did not let Peter sink. He didn't make Peter swim back to the boat.. Instead Jesus Immediately reaches out his hand and catches Peter. It's only after he picks Peter up out of the water that he says, "you of little faith. Whey did you doubt." I almost imagine Peter standing there again on the water soaking and perhaps a bit of shock at the miracle and the miracle again. Jesus puts his hand on Peter's shoulder as they turn to walk back to the boat just like a good coach and an athlete might walk off the field after a near perfect game: "You did so well. I know you doubted yourself out there, but have faith next time."

And all Peter did to receive such love, such support and guidance was cry out to Jesus as he was doubting, “Lord save me!” And Jesus immediately saves him and encourages him.

With Jesus we don’t actually need to prove anything… when we doubt, we can just cry out to Jesus and Jesus will immediately rescue us, encourage us, save us.

Doubt is a part of life.. we may doubt own abilities. We may even need doubt to fuel our success and help us make discerning choices ..so it only makes sense that we doubt supernatural miracles even as they are happening to us.. but remember as you are doubting that we have a God who has so much compassion that he sent his only son to save us and do as Peter did… cry out to Jesus, “Lord save me!” And Jesus will immediately lift you out of your doubt.