



*Loosening the knots:*

## Understanding

Sarah Young

A life of discipleship will involve frequently being asked, as Peter was by Jesus, to step out of our comfort zones, and each invitation to do this can make us anxious. But Sarah Young has found that the Spirit's gift of understanding has allowed her to place herself in the boat, alongside Peter, and re-imagine a daunting step into the unknown as an opportunity to affirm our trust in Jesus. This shift in understanding that begins in the imagination is so often a source of life.

Jesus has a vice-like grip on my arm. He did not just reach for my hand as I began to sink but took hold of my wrist and held me firm. He raises me above the surface of the water with ease. He then holds me with his gaze. It is calm and reassuring.

The memory of praying imaginatively with the passage from Matthew's Gospel (14:22-33) in which Jesus calls Peter towards him on the water still holds me firm at times of change and transition. It helps me to go forward when opportunities arise to let go of what is safe and familiar and enter into what is unknown.

As a spiritual director, I am always curious to see what happens when others enter into this story in their imagination. I have offered it to retreatants many times especially when they are faced with a decision to be made. One bounds out of the boat without hesitation. Another sinks below the waves and continues to fall into the deep before Jesus's hand looms out of the dark to save them. Yet another sits and contemplates whether to leave the boat at all, and then sits some more. In a workshop in a high secur-



ity prison, I delighted in seeing a prisoner playing Peter in a roleplay not only step out of the boat onto the water but begin to dance – and he could really dance! Unfailingly, the word of God speaks through this passage to aid the journey of the one who contemplates it and considers the choices they make in their own life in the light of it.

I sometimes wonder if Peter felt that once was enough to step out of a boat onto the insecurity of water. Many disciples discover, as Peter did, that they will be asked to step out of several boats in the course of their lives. I have come to understand that to follow Jesus involves stepping out of one boat after another in order to be stretched again and again. It is like Jesus, or any good teacher, saying: 'Ok, you've got that bit – now, let's move on'. It is often when I have just got comfortable in my current seat and am beginning to enjoy the view, that the invitation comes to step out again into the unknown. It is as though God sees a further opportunity to expand my vision and my capacity to work alongside God in the world. It can rankle. Why would I choose to become the

novice again and take another risk when I am quite happy where I am? It seems counter-intuitive and yet, the logic of the gospel tells me otherwise. I am reminded of Jesus's gentle advice to the disciples: 'unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Matt 18: 3).

This cycle of getting comfortable, stepping out and learning to trust Jesus is not without pain and loss. Jesus's own relationship with God bears witness to this through his passion, death and resurrection. Peter's relationship with Jesus bears witness to it, too, over the course of his life. Over recent years, I have come to understand that I suffer quite considerably from anxiety when faced with new situations. I thought this was the same for most people but through my own training as a psychotherapist, I came to see that there is a healthy level of anxiety that keeps us alert to danger, and higher levels that are less healthy and exaggerate the danger. It turns out that stepping out of the boat is quite a big deal, and the emotional and physical cost can be considerable.

The time in lockdown offered me the opportunity to look at this more carefully in the safety of my own home. I looked back to times of transition or challenge and considered just what happened to me physically and psychologically, and I explored what self-help books had to say about tackling the symptoms of anxiety. I notice my 'yes' to a new invitation is often given easily. In the moment, I am excited by the challenge and recognise that I might have the gifts and experience to rise to it. But as I enter into the reality of it, I often take fright, usually at about 3am, and mutter to myself: 'Why did I ever say yes to this?' The self-help guru might offer something along the lines of the following:

Step 1: What is it that I fear will happen? Catch the thought and name the fear.

Peter might, at this point, say: 'I am on water and I know I am going down. I will drown.'

Step 2: How likely is it that this will happen?

For Peter, his human understanding of water might prompt him to answer that the likelihood is really quite high.

Step 3: If my worst fear is realised, what might happen then?

Well, the other disciples are not far away in the boat and Jesus is watching me calmly from his place standing on the water. Between Jesus and the disciples, they are not going to let me drown. If he had had more time, Peter might have considered reframing his initial fear and it may have changed how the story played out. However, I suspect this version would not have helped me to relate to Peter quite as easily as I do.

My own question at this point is: 'Do I believe that Jesus will save me?' That's the thing! 'Do I believe that he and others will not let me drown?' It is a question of trust.

My encounter with Jesus in the safety of my imagination leads me to trust that he will not let me drown. This foundation of trust leads me to act when I emerge from my quiet place of prayer. What was imagined becomes a reality. It is only trust in Jesus that enables me to move from my seat in the boat at all.

The first time I experienced the power of this passage in prayer was in a retreat preparing for mission overseas as a Columban Lay Missionary over twenty years ago. I did not know to which country I would be assigned. It was truly a step into the unknown. Jesus's vice-like grip on my arm held me on a journey that expanded my faith, my world and my relationships with God and with other people. That journey tested my resilience, patience and resourcefulness, as there were times when I really was sinking and going down fast. The smallest gestures of human kindness saved me and reminded me of Jesus's desire to hold me fast to that initial, confident 'yes'.

Since then, many new opportunities have arisen to step out of the particular boat I find myself in at any given time. Doing so may not require me to go anywhere at all geographically, but I can feel the same nudge as if it did. Some new waters into which I have stepped, even though physically close to home, have felt as alien as if I were on the other side of the globe. Returning to this passage creatively can help me to imagine whatever it is I am about to do in terms of stepping out of the boat, and therefore to respond in faith. It may mean having a difficult conversation that I would rather avoid, taking up a new challenge that will stretch me once again, or making a paradigm shift in the way I work with and relate to others. In so many ways, we are called as followers of Jesus to keep stepping out of the boat. We are called to trust him and to act.

As I write this, I am settling into a new house in a new place. As the move became a real possibility, anxiety began to rise. I was, again, making a cup of tea at 3am and grappling with the advice from self-help books to name the fear so that I could work on reframing it. Again, I was wondering why I was not content to stay

put in the familiarity of my old home. But I have come to know that change and some risk brings new energy, new life and new relationships. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius assures us that consolation will return even if it is not immediate or easily found. The narrative of the passage from Matthew's Gospel helps me to trust the narrative of my own life, and to know that even if my worst fears are realised, my friends and family are not far away and Jesus will certainly not let me drown.

On retreats, I never tire of witnessing the encounter between Jesus and the person who prays this passage imaginatively. The narrative is different for each person, but in one way or another it informs their way of being a disciple. What begins in the mind of the individual, in the realm of the imagination, can lead to that vital, actual first step into something new – a step that can only be made again and again if we understand the invitation to trust and respond to it.

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