

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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You, of little faith, why do you doubt?

When I was a little boy, my family belonged to a large, established church. It had a good sized staff, several services every week, even a pre-school and a children's choir. It was a nice place to be a kid.

When I got a little older though, five families from the big church went to the pastor with a crazy idea. They said, "Listen, we all drive here from the next town over. That town doesn't have a church. Maybe we should plant one there."

What a novel idea. The five families were people of deep faith and much beloved in the church. The five families were all strong givers to the church. They were leaders, and, among them, they were parents to about ¼ of the youth program. It would be rough to lose those five families. And, really, the families must have been plagued with all kinds of scary questions: how do you even go about starting a brand new church? Where would they meet? Who would be the new members? How would they grow?

And to the pastor's credit and the families' credit, it was agreed that a church would be planted. So the five families met in a living room on Sunday mornings for several months—praying, reading scripture, drinking coffee, and listening for the Holy Spirit.

Once they felt more clarity about their mission, the five families secured a storefront space next to a dentist, right off the main highway into town. It was about 15 feet by 15 feet, had a tiny office, kitchenette, and restroom. A local hotel ballroom had just bought brand new chairs and donated their old ones to the little mission. The families pooled some money and rented a piano and called a very part time pastor out of retirement to lead services. One of the men was quite a woodworker; he built an altar and a pulpit. (They took an old pastor's stole and draped it over the altar to let people know what church season they were in.) My mom sewed a banner that said "HOPE," and Peter's Creek Mission Church was open for business. And for years, that little mission church walked on the water. You show me a group of people with some faith, and I'll show you a group of people who can do anything.

You, of little faith, why do you doubt? That's what Jesus says to Peter. And I have always felt that the answer to that question is self-evident. I know why Peter doubts. He doubts because he is

afraid. Rightfully so! This Jesus is asking that his disciples give everything. This Jesus is asking humble people to do great things. Peter doubts that he can really be like Jesus. He's aware of the winds buffeting him here and there while he tries to walk on the water. And, friends, sometimes those winds blow—little gusts of that make us falter—of deficits, old buildings, apathy. Or full blown hurricanes, like the one marching through Charlottesville this weekend, waving Nazi flags and preaching white supremacy. Yes, the winds do blow, and Peter is understandably afraid. I know why he doubts.

But, sisters and brothers, doubt is not how Christianity works. We are people of faith. That means that we are people of gumption. We are people who can do the impossible because we worship the God of the impossible. Just a few hours after I saw photos of white nationalists marching with torches in the south, I saw video of all the area clergy—Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu—marching arm in arm and singing songs of solidarity and love. “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid,” Jesus says. The blind see. The sick are healed. The hungry eat. The grieving dance. The lake is a road. That's the business of our God. The impossible.

I don't believe that faith is simple assent to a set of beliefs. And I don't believe that faith is carrying the Nicene Creed around in your wallet for easy reference—however helpful that might be in these trying times. I think, instead, that faith is a posture we choose in this stormy life. Faith is the radical notion that we can do all things through Christ.

I've never been interested in how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or in figuring out exactly how you are supposed to bow when you approach the altar. But this truth lives deep in my bones: that a group of Christians full of faith can do anything.

Those five families started a church. They broke bread together, sang together, prayed together. And then one day, they started to wonder what they ought to do next. So, being church people, they had a meeting. They sat down together and asked, “What is our faith requiring of us in this little town?” They looked around, they assessed the needs of the community, and they decided that one of the issues facing their community was a real lack of support for kids between the hours of 2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m. Latchkey kids. Parents were working hard and commuting, and the kids were often left on their own.

So that tiny little church went out in faith with a big idea. They let it be known in the community that the church would be open every Wednesday after school for snacks, homework time, Sunday School lessons, and safe adults—all totally free. After a while, they even started offering rides. And before long, there were over sixty kids in the after school program. Think about that. A church with 20 people was hosting an after school program with over 60 kids. And that little church grew. And grew. And grew. They grew so much they had to rent a second storefront.

They grew so much that they had to make up extra roles for the Christmas pageant. They grew so much that they were no longer a mission church but were a parish in their own right.

All from faith. All from the belief that, with Christ, all things are possible. I believe this. This is my testimony to you because I have lived it, and I have seen it in a million different ways. The food we eat at this altar is the real thing. It binds us and transforms us. And the people of St. Mark's, by faith, can do amazing things. We can walk on water.

We may falter a little, like Peter. The winds can be too much sometimes. So what? Jesus' hand is always there to lift us up. Our fear is nothing compared to our faith. Amen.