

Who Is This?

Mark 4:35-41

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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It must have been quite a storm for even fishermen to panic and fear imminent death. *Teacher, don't you care if we drown?*

The question betrays the disciples' dismay. They don't cry, "Help us, Jesus!" or "Jesus, wake up!" They accuse: *Don't you care about us? Don't you realize what is about to happen?* It's a small but significant detail. Maybe it also helps to account for Jesus' reply: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Sometimes it may seem to us that Christ is asleep in our boat. We doubt God's care for us. We doubt God's awareness of our plight. We panic. Yet, probably way more often, it is *we* who are asleep *to Christ* in our boat. And maybe that helps to account for our dismay when the storms of life assail us.

Because until the storm hits, we may not especially care whether Christ is in our boat. We may, in fact, be quite happy to chart our own course and navigate by our own reckoning. We and the disciples share a problem and a challenge.

The problem for the disciples wasn't that Christ was asleep. The problem for the disciples was that they couldn't grasp who this was in their boat, and what that meant. *Who is this?* they cry. *Even the wind and the waves obey him!* They already knew Jesus as a miracle worker, and as an astonishingly authoritative rabbi. But who is it who has authority over the winds and the waves?

The disciples experienced fear and panic. They knew Jesus, but they didn't yet know everything about him. Just like us. This is our challenge as well. While we can say we know Jesus, it still takes us a lifetime to awaken to who he really and truly is. Our problem isn't that Jesus is asleep to our situation in life. Much more likely, the problem is that we haven't fully awakened to who Jesus is.

When you think about it, there are many layers or levels in knowing Jesus. And there are many degrees within each of these levels. The first one is just knowing *about* Jesus. From the least bit of awareness to even having a great deal of interest and even expertise, one can know a little or a lot about Jesus. But it is all just knowing something *about* Jesus.

Then there is the level of coming to know Jesus personally. This means beginning to place a bit of trust in Jesus. Knowing Jesus not just as a person who lived a long time ago, but as Someone who, in some mysterious way, is still present for me to get to know. The degrees of knowing Jesus in this way might include knowing Jesus as my Friend, my Helper, and ultimately, as my Savior. In this level of knowing Jesus, a certain personal commitment to Jesus grows.

The next level of knowing Jesus might be called knowing him as Lord—and maybe every other level is ultimately included in this one. Mark the Gospel writer is certainly concerned to convey to us the many ways that Jesus is Lord. In the first few chapters of his book, he makes it clear that Jesus is Lord over evil spirits, Lord over all kinds of illnesses, even Lord of the Sabbath. Here in today's story, Jesus is revealed as Lord over the wind and the waves. In the next chapter, Jesus again demonstrates his lordship over demons, and even proves he is Lord over death.

All this is to encourage us to make Jesus Lord of our lives. But this isn't something we can do all at once or need to do only once. It's something that we continue to do, day by day, year by year. It can take a long time to work out and to surrender to Jesus the areas of our life—or, as Bob Munger put it long ago—the rooms of our hearts. But until Jesus is Lord here, we are really asleep to who he really is.

The New Creation Initiative highlighted the fact that Jesus is also Lord of the Church—that Jesus calls us into service as part of a community of faith. We are invited to the banquet table of fellowship to experience the wonder of seeing Christ in our brothers and sisters.

But Scripture also makes clear that Jesus is Lord of creation. We have a habit of drawing boundaries, but God claims the world as his own, and sends us into the world as agents of his kingdom. Here we are invited to experience perhaps the most profound of connections—being able to see Christ in the poor, the outcast, the weak and the stranger.

All these dimensions of Jesus' lordship are part of a unity—it's not as though we can do some but not others. And they in fact reinforce each other. Our personal devotion to Jesus enhances what we bring to the church, which magnifies what our congregation might offer to the world. And it also works back and forth, because what we experience as we engage with the world, comes back to nourish both congregation and individual. Just think of the Rainbow Connection (the sending of some of our youth to Japan this summer) in this regard.

Last week I did something I've never done before. I spent half of my day off submitting to a number of tests and interviews as part of a unique health and lifestyle research project. Years ago, when I was in grade school on Kauai, a researcher at the University of Hawaii began a study involving about 2,400 school kids on Kauai and Oahu. Forty years later, a team of researchers is tracking about half of these people, trying to learn all sorts of things about the relationship between culture, lifestyle and health. I'm one of these guinea pigs. For years, I've responded to the occasional questionnaire sent out by the researchers, but last week was the first time that I went in for a physical exam and an interview.

Earlier, I had been tempted to check out of this study, thinking that it just asked too much of my limited time, especially this half-day appointment. But something made me commit, and I'm glad I did. I was told that this research project is unique in the world. No other project is tracking so many people over so long a time for this kind of research. It's my unique opportunity to take part in something that can offer insight and help to many others in the future.

I realized last week that it's a gift to be able to be part of something bigger than ourselves. Even when we don't share in the benefits of what we contribute to, being able to be a part of it is in itself a gift. Driving home from that appointment last week, I felt my world was bigger and richer than before I went.

It makes me realize that when we struggle with our faith, it's usually not that God has abandoned us, but that we have turned inward and turned our backs on God's presence instead. Our awareness tends to retreat to our immediate concerns and cares, but when it does, it also goes blind to what God is up to far beyond the small window of our life. It isn't that Christ is asleep to us in our boat; it's more like we are asleep to Christ—in our own lives, but also in the greater arena beyond our limited existence.

Often, when we pull back, we pull away from our inviting and loving God. We feel like he has abandoned us. Far more likely, we have abandoned him. Another way to say the same thing is to say that sometimes we run too far ahead of God. We press on in life, but not in Christ. Like the experience of some at church camp last weekend, we find that we need to slow down to keep up with God.

But there still are storms in our lives. Just think of Iraq. Iran. Israel. North Korea. Terrorism. AIDS in Africa. Global warming. Hurricane season beginning again. Oil production peaking. It is all too easy to feel like the waves are swamping the world, and we are all in danger of going under. And our doubt rises: *Teacher, don't you care if we drown?*

The most honored Christian theologian of the last century offered these words, which I think casts some precious light on Jesus' response to his

disciples. Karl Barth wrote, *Everyone who has to contend with unbelief should be advised that he ought not to take his own unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken seriously, and if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, that suffices for the devil to have lost his game* (*Dogmatics in Outline*, cited in *A Year with Thomas Merton*, p. 278).

When Jesus says to his disciples, *Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?* it's not that he is irritated or impatient with them. He says it because that is the ultimate issue. There *will be* storms in this world, in our lives, until grace brings us safely home. The question is whether we will learn the faith that holds us fast to the Lord of All—or or whether we will falter, abandon hope and maybe even pursue other gods.

Our response will largely be determined by how well we can answer the question of Jesus: Who is this?

Is he only the Jesus I learned of long ago? The second-hand Jesus I cobbled together from places I can't even identify? The Jesus of my parents, maybe, or of my friends? Or is he the Lord of All—and my Lord as well?

Jesus scholar Tom Wright tells of a friend lecturing at a theological college in Kenya. The lecture was about "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." It was the typical introduction to the critical Western studies that largely denied the Jesus of the Bible. "He had not gone far into his lecture explaining this search for Jesus when one of his students interrupted him. 'Teacher,' he said... 'if the Germans have lost Jesus, that is their problem. We have not lost him. We know him. We love him.'" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 13).

May we know the grace for this to also be our answer to the question *Who is Jesus?*