

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH (UCC)**  
**Sunday, August 13, 2023**  
**Sermon - “Ghost”**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**

**Matthew 14:22-33** New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition  
Jesus Walks on the Water

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,[a] for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind,[b] he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

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I’ve been living in the church for two weeks now, and firstly, I want to thank you all for entrusting our family with this sacred space that you’ve all built. It’s been a prayerful experience to get to know not only the people of the church, but also the building you’ve constructed together. I walk through the halls in the twilight of the evening and I can almost hear the echoes of laughter from youth groups. I open the cabinets in the classrooms upstairs and find remnants of Sunday school projects, community yard sales, and family barbeques. Once in a while, someone like Harvey or Jenny shows up and offers me snippets of what it was like for them watching the church being built as children and what joy it brought for the community. The memories of times past surround me in this building, and truthfully, sometimes it leaves me with some sadness. It feels like something was here that now only offers shadows of itself. It feels like a ghost.

Ok, I hear you saying it: “Pastor? Ghosts aren’t real.” Well, let’s talk about that – because it says right here in the biblical text that the disciples thought they had seen a ghost when they saw Jesus crossing the water toward them. No word in the Bible is placed in error, and as I pondered the feeling of a ghost following me in the church building, I looked into why that word was specifically used in our scripture reading this week.

Ghost. What does Matthew mean by this word? In this chapter from the Gospel, the disciples are frightened when they see Jesus walking on the water because they believe they’ve seen what Matthew specifically calls a “fantasma” in Greek, which most accurately translates to

“ghost” in English. In the ancient Hellenistic world, a “fantasma” or “ghost” is a spirit of a deceased person who comes at the edge of night, in the shadows or twilight or dawn, seeking to have an aspect of the physical world corrected.

Bible scholars believe that Matthew and Mark, who both use the term “fantasma” in the Jesus Walking on Water story, were very intentional about their wording. The scripture specifically states that Jesus came at the edge of night in the early hours of dawn, the time of day when Hellenistic ghosts were thought to manifest. Scripture states that the physical world was in a state of unrest during a storm, which is the context in which ghosts were expected to appear in the ancient world.

The evocation of the word “fantasma” is intentional because it narrates a setting of fear. Specifically, it implies the fear of something unfinished from the past trying to disrupt the progress of the present. The disciples feared being tossed overboard in the storm, but even more acutely, they feared Jesus had abandoned them as he went off by himself to pray. The disciples may have been thinking: “Look at all this momentum we created! We just fed 5,000 people with 2 fishes and 5 loaves! Surely this can’t be the end of our story, alone in this boat, with Jesus nowhere to be found?” The happy memory of the miracles Jesus delivered was overshadowed by his sudden absence in a storm, and that dashing away of hope and promise of yesterday is the ghost that the disciples envisioned in their minds as they watched Him cross the water toward them.

Does this sound familiar? The empty classrooms and hallways of the church sometimes look like ghosts from the miraculous ministries of yesterday. The physical vacancies of those spaces, which clearly once held the laughter, curiosity, and joy of discipleship, loom in the twilight hours as something yearning to be corrected. The stories I’ve heard already from many of you reflect times of hope and promise within these walls. And while that hope and promise still illuminates the fellowship of this room, the ghosts of what once was and no longer is lingers through the hallways upstairs.

Yet, we find in this story that it was not a ghost at all, but Jesus Himself. Jesus arrives at the boat and responds to the disciples’ fear by saying, “Take heart, it is I; Do not be afraid.” He then invites Peter to walk on the water as a test of faith. It’s a demonstration that through God, all things are possible, and all we need to do is have faith in Him. Whatever manifestation of fear that we have lurking in our lives, the shadows we see rising out of a long, scary night – are not real. God will not only deliver us through the storms of the night, but also invite us into even more than we can imagine – He invites us to walk on water with Him!

Matthew contrasts the word “fantasma” with the reality of Jesus walking on water because he understood how it felt to watch the world, everything you knew and understood, crumble around you. After watching the Roman empire destroy the Jewish temple only a decade before writing his Gospel, Matthew knew what it felt like to watch his beloved community fall quiet and feel like ghosts haunted the familiar places he once loved. But, more importantly, he knew that Jesus was stronger than the fear he felt. He knew that Jesus would not only deliver the faithful out of the storm, but into a new world of beauty and imagination.

Despite the rooms upstairs, the hallways, and the offices going relatively quiet in recent years, you're all still here. You're still here because you believe Jesus' words: "Take Heart, it is I; Do not be afraid" more than you believe the threat of what looks like a ghost.

When I walk through the halls of this church and look at the old things of times past in the cabinets, I'm not looking at ghosts, even if that's sometimes what my human fear whispers in my ear that's what I'm seeing. Instead, I'm looking at the promise of He who inspired you all to come together and build this church. I'm looking at not only the promised delivery of the faithful out of a storm, but the invitation to do more than we had ever imagined. I'm looking at our invitation to stop seeing ghosts and instead walk on water with Christ holding our hands.

We are here together today because we know that it's not a ghost we're looking at. We are here together today because we know that Jesus's miracles only grow stronger and more powerful in the face of threat and insecurity if we just have faith in Him. Because Jesus is here, in this church, in these hallways – the threat of ghosts has no power here.

So I ask you, dear friends, what will we do when the time comes for Jesus to invite us to walk on water? I am very certain that time is to come soon, and I ask of you all to prayerfully be prepared. For those who have faith, God's promise of renewal and miracles never dies. When He reaches out his hands to guide us, we better be prepared to walk on water instead of looking for ghosts of times past. People of Kailua Christian Church, together under Christ's guidance, we can hold His hand and walk out on that water and let go of those visions of ghosts together.

Amen.