As many of you know, we're looking at various miracles of Jesus this summer, but before I get to today's miracle, I first want to share with you a story Pastor Fred Craddock tells about a time he flew to San Diego, California. He writes, “I was on that side of the plane that has just two seats. You know, some of the planes have three seats on one side, and only two on the other. I was on the side with two seats, on the aisle, and this woman, who looked to be in her forty’s, was right next to me at the window. So I spoke to her. I usually try to do some work on the plane… read, study, whatever, but I noticed she was crying, noticeably crying. And, you know, being a pastor, you're supposed to say something. So I said, ‘I see this is not a very happy trip for you.’ She said, ‘No it isn't.’ ‘Well, I'm sorry,’ I said. She replied, 'I'm going to my father's funeral.’ ‘Oh, that’s too bad.’ She kept crying. What else should I say? ‘I can tell by your tears that you and your father must have been very close.’ She surprised me by saying, ‘No, on the contrary. I haven't spoken to my father, written to my father, called my father, seen my father, for seventeen years.’ ‘Seventeen years! Really!’ ‘In fact,’ she said, ‘the last time I saw him I was in his home and we got into a quarrel. I left the table, threw my napkin on my plate, and as I slammed the door leaving his house, I said, ‘You can go to hell.’ That's the last thing I said to my father. And now he's dead. Now he's gone…”

I tell you this story because it describes just a one… just a one, of the many different kinds of storms of trouble we all go through in this life – estrangement from a parent. Or, it could just as easily be estrangement from a child, or a spouse, or a friend. Then there are those other storms…cruel storms that hit us or a loved one with a physical or mental illness. Or there's the waves of remorse that come over us when we think of our past mistakes and things we’ve done wrong in life. There’s the dark clouds of worry hanging over our head about money or jobs or the kids. There’s the storms of helplessness and meaninglessness over the way our lives seem to be going. Yes, we all face storms in this life. They are unavoidable. But how we face these storms can make all the difference. For that lady on the plane with Fred Craddock, the storm in her life went from bad to worse. Over the years she let the storm brew until it finally unleashed it’s fury and she was left crying in the aftermath. And, in fact, she now faces a new and even worse storm – she has to live the rest of her life with the pain of guilt and regret.
That's why I think today's miracle story is a good one for us. Because it has major implications that can help us face those storms that come our way. So let's look again at the scripture. It's the middle of the night, it's dark, there's a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples are in the midst of it, in a small boat, trying to get to the other side. The wind is strong, the waves are crashing over the sides, and it's frightening. But suddenly, Jesus appears – walking toward the boat on top of the water, assuring them, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here. I am with you.” And aren’t these the words we long to hear from Jesus when the storms are raging around us? “Don’t be afraid. I’m here. I am with you.” Then what happens? Peter thinks to himself, “It’s the Lord. I don’t have to fear. In fact, I have faith that I can walk on water too.” So he says, “Lord, tell me to come to you, walking on the water.” And Jesus answers, “Yes, come!” So Peter steps out of the boat and begins walking on the water toward Jesus. Because it's true, we can do, and get through, those seemingly impossible things, when we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, trusting him. However, then Peter looks away and notices how churned up, dark and threatening the waves beneath him are, and how strong the winds are blowing. At that point, faith’s powerful adversary, doubt, yes doubt, sets in, and he begins to sink. Doubt sets in and he cries out in desperation, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand to take hold of Peter, saying to him, “You have so little faith. Why do you doubt?” And together they get back into the boat and the storm is over.

“Why do you doubt?” Can you hear Jesus asking you the same question? For isn't this story, our story too. Just look at the parallels to those times in our lives when the storms come upon us. Often at the first sign of a storm, our faith and hope in God enable us to step out of the boat, and move forward. And for a time, we put our complete trust in the Lord and he keeps us up and going. But then, when we don’t get the answer we want right away, when we don't get that cure, when the worries continue to build up, when the winds continue to blow hard against us, then that doubt overcomes us and our faith falters. And we can feel ourselves starting to sink below the waves as well. Yes, Peter’s story is our story. As professor Barbara Brown Taylor says, “(We’re all just like Peter), we obey and we fear, we walk and we sink, we believe and we doubt. Our faith and our doubt…exists in us at the same time, buoying us up and bearing us down, giving us courage and feeding our fears, supporting our weight on the wild seas of our lives and sinking us like stones. But that is exactly why we need Jesus Christ.”

1 The Seeds of Heaven, Barbara Brown Taylor
Because think about it. What options do we really have? Can we really put all our hopes in ourselves, or in other human beings, in medicines, or technology? Certainly these have their merits, but they also have their limitations. And so, our ultimate answer has to be found in Jesus Christ. And that’s why this miracle story is such a hopeful one for us. You see, Peter shows us that as long as we keep focused on Jesus, as long as we follow him, look to him, as long as we have even “a little faith,” we can overcome the doubt, and cry out to Jesus, “Save me, Lord,” and we can experience a miracle in our lives. Yes, even though we may falter along the way, as did Peter, when we turn our eyes to Jesus, trusting in him, the seemingly impossible can happen – Christ can help us weather our storms, taking us by our hand and leading us to a place of peace and calm and hope and joy. We just have to stay focused on Jesus with faith and trust. Because you see, faith believes that God, in Jesus Christ, not only has the power over the storms of nature, but he has power over the storms in our lives as well. Faith believes that he has the power to change circumstances, to change people, to change hearts. As Pastor William Sloane Coffin says, “Faith must be lived before it can ever be understood, and the more it is lived, the more things become possible… sinners can become saints, hate filled relationships can turn into loving relationships, cowardice can turn into courage, the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. In instance after instance, life after life, I have seen the power of Christ (change individuals and circumstances) and that’s miracle enough for me.” And, as your pastor, I can attest to his statement, because I’ve seen it happen with many of you.

Yes, if we keep our focus and faith on Jesus, his outstretched arms will be there for us to keep us from sinking, from falling. Which leads me to a final story by world renowned theologian Henri Nouwen. A famous German circus once visited the town in which he was living, and one of the circus acts was the internationally acclaimed troupe of trapeze artists, “The Flying Rodleighs.” Nouwen wrote that he was able to sit with the leader of the troupe, talking about the dangers of his work. Rodleigh said to him, ’As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joseph, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.’ Nouwen asked, 'How does it work?' 'The secret,' Rodleigh said, 'is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joseph, I have simply to stretch out my arms and wait for him to catch me with his hands and pull me safely onto the platform.' 'You do nothing!' Nouwen said, surprised. 'Nothing,' Rodleigh repeated. 'The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joseph. It's Joseph's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joseph's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, or
we could fall, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and
the flyer must have faith and trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'
Nouwen writes, “When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, (I realized, life is like that) - one
must trust the catcher. Trust that God will be there when you are forced to make a long jump - or even
when you're going through the storm. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just reach out your arms
toward him with faith and trust.” Amen.