

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

<sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup>He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."  
[Matthew 14:22-33]

Grace and peace to you this beautiful morning from God the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ of God, Amen.

Today I'm going to make a case that the Apostle Peter is innocent; that he's not guilty of having a weak faith, based on Matthew 14, our Gospel reading for today.

I will be doing so as Peter's defense attorney; you, on the other hand, will act as jury. As jury your task is simple: you must determine, based on the evidence presented, if the Apostle Peter is guilty of having a weak faith, or not guilty of having a weak faith. Understood? Good.

Let us begin. We start in the middle of the trial. The prosecution has just made its case. A one-minute recess has been called, after which the defense attorney will defend his client, showing how, again based on Matthew 14, our Gospel reading for today, he has, in fact, the *strongest* faith of all the 12 disciples.

This one-minute recess begins now...

(Laughter as Pastor Dan returns with suitcoat, tie, and briefcase, as the defense lawyer)

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: you have now heard the closing arguments of the prosecution, namely, that my client, the Apostle Peter, the Rock upon which our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, indicated he would build His church, according to Matthew 16, is guilty! Guilty of not only betraying his Lord and Savior shortly before his crucifixion, but guilty of foreshadowing that betrayal by exhibiting a weak faith, as evident in the story Matthew tells of Jesus walking on water. (Is that okay, defense attorney, is that the appropriate amount of conviction? Yes, okay... )

Peter, as you heard from Matthew, responded to the sight of Jesus on the water by getting out of the boat and walking on the sea, but he became frightened; he hesitated. He wavered, and in so doing, he began to sink. Matthew confirms what we now heard from the prosecution regarding why. Jesus, he tells us, immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying to him, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" or, as other translations render it, "Why did you hesitate? Why did you waver?" This hesitation, this wavering, this lack of faith, purportedly led to what the prosecution identified as a series of subsequent betrayals: his denial of Jesus three times after Jesus was seized by Roman authorities; his absence at the time of Jesus's crucifixion; and his failure to believe [now according to Mark], that the tomb in which Jesus had been laid to rest was empty, that Jesus had been raised indeed from the dead.

True – Peter's lack of faith ironically became a source of *encouragement* to later Christians, some of whom were Lutherans, who reasoned that if Jesus's preeminent disciple, Peter, the Rock upon which Jesus would build His church, can sink due to lack of faith, this can happen to anyone! But *that*, the prosecution concluded, should not take away from the fact that Peter doubted; that his faith was weak.

(Now, that performance was based on a compilation of rehearsals I did after watching *Inherit the Wind*, after watching *Perry Mason*, and of course after watching my favorite, *Judge Judy*.)

Members of the jury, my client, like any of us, was indeed anything but perfect. The defense concedes that he betrayed Jesus by denying him three times shortly before the crucifixion. The defense also concedes that Peter, like the other disciples, failed to be present at the crucifixion, for fear of his own life. None of these facts, however, not a one, imply or suggest that Peter's faith was consistently weak.

Take a look at Matthew 14 (what the pastor, who I hear is a pretty decent guy, referred to earlier as "our Gospel reading for today.") The prosecution would like you to believe that Jesus rightly chastises Peter for having weak faith. In truth, however, Jesus should have chastised the 11 disciples who stayed in the boat! Peter, indeed, is the *only*

*one* who responded to the call of Jesus, the *only one* who risked getting out of the boat, the *only one*, albeit briefly, who walked on water, while the other men huddled together in fear!

And there's more: Peter may have succumbed to fear when the Roman authorities apprehended Jesus and crucified Him. But according to Luke, when women tell the disciples about the empty tomb, the disciples all dismiss it as an idle tale. *Except my client, Peter*. He runs to see the tomb for himself, only to be amazed at what had happened. The Gospel of John essentially says the same thing.

When the prosecution cited Mark 16, which says that all of the disciples, Peter included, rejected Mary Magdalene's claim that Jesus had been raised, they conveniently glossed over the fact that this part of Mark's account was *added a century later*. The evidence, in other words, is dubious.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the prosecution has maligned my client's character. Granted, granted, in our Gospel reading for today he wavered, he hesitated, but *nobody else got out of the boat!* Only Peter did! He exhibited the *greatest* faith of them by stepping out of the boat in the midst of a storm, in risk, in response to the call of his Savior, Jesus Christ.

What an example he provides to us all. As people of faith – this is a Christian jury, after all – are you not prepared to do what Peter did? To risk rejection, for example, when it comes to helping a person in need? And as a church, as a congregation, are you ready to risk failure, as Peter did, in order to succeed; trusting Jesus will be with you, not only in your triumphs, but also in your failures?

You have certainly stepped out of the boat in the past. The incredible organ behind you, the magnificent kitchen in the Fellowship Hall beneath you, and the fantastic Cantor playing for you, are all examples of what it means for a congregation, like Peter, to step out on the water of uncertainty, and risk what they have for the glory of God.

The question, therefore, and I say this by way of conclusion, should not only be, "What would Jesus do?" Based on today's reading, it should be "What would *Peter* do?"

The defense rests.

And now, as members of this distinguished jury, what is your verdict?

You have three choices:

Is Peter guilty of having a weak faith, consistently?

Or is Peter vindicated – is his faith actually strong?

Or finally, are you undecided, and need to gather more information?

For all of you who think Peter is guilty of having a weak faith, please raise your hand.  
For all of you who think that Peter is vindicated in our Gospel reading for today, that his faith, at least compared to the other disciples, is strong, raise your hand.

For all of you who are undecided, raise your hand. (I'll find you after the service. We'll talk about this more!)

But what I find remarkable about what I just saw, is that none of you accepted the prosecution's case. Peter is vindicated by Queen Anne Lutheran Church. He does not have a weak faith.

Amen.