

When I get the chance to talk with y'all 1-on-1,
what often comes up is one of you worrying about your lack of faith.

Not lack of faith in a broad, "Is there anything out there" kind of way.
It's usually one of you wondering if what you really believe
about Jesus and his beautifully pointed question to
his disciples this morning makes you a bad Christian.

Jesus said,
"Yeah, I know that OTHER people say all kinds of things about me,
and that's fine - But who do YOU say that I am?"

When I talk with y'all 1-on-1,
more often than you might think,
the conversation ends up with you saying
you aren't sure how YOU would answer that question.

Not everybody says that, of course,
but it happens enough that it's a little funny now
when I tell people they are not the only ones here with those doubts.

Funny, because it seems that a lot of Christians
think that a lot of OTHER Christians
have a lot more certainty about Jesus than they really do.

If only we could all be like Peter.



Peter - the Rock.

Peter - the one upon whom Jesus built his Church.

Peter - who got the hard question directly from Jesus and did not flinch:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

If only WE could have seen with our own eyes the things that Peter saw.

Like Jesus healing people. Jesus walking on water and calming the storm,
feeding 5,000 one day and then 4,000 another,
all with only a handful of bread and fish.

If we could have seen these things ourselves
instead of reading about them 2,000 years later,
then maybe we could be cornerstones of the Church, too.

“You are the Messiah,” he said, “the Son of the Living God.” Amazing.



Except it's not really that simple, is it?

The picture of Peter in today's gospel is just as curated
as those posts it seems like all my clergy friends make of
their “perfect” trips to the Holy Land.

Peter LOOKS so perfect this morning
that we can all start to feel like an inferior Christian,
a not-quite-good-enough follower of Jesus.

Until you remember the rest of Peter's story.



If you keep reading in Matthew the very next words
that Jesus says to Peter are, “Get behind me, Satan!
You are a stumbling-block to me.”

Peter gets it wrong at least as often as he gets it right,
and on the night Jesus needed him the most,
Peter denied even knowing who Jesus was 3 separate times.

And yet, I’m still convinced Jesus knew exactly who he called
to be the foundation of his Church,
knew all of Peter’s strengths and weaknesses,
and still decided that Peter was exactly the person for the job.

Peter IS the rock upon whom Christ has built his Church,
but that rock is also an imperfect, fearful, all-too-human being.

Just like us.



There’s a good chance that I’m the one needing this reminder
of our imperfect faith,
because I’ve had a bit of a week,
and unfortunately I’ve found myself acting
more like Peter on his bad days than his good.

Nothing scandalous or embarrassing, thank God.
In fact, it’s how ordinary it all is
that made me want to talk about it this morning.

Just the same everyday burdens of life that happen to
each one of us when we live with open hearts.



Early this week I visited some people I love
who are going through really hard times.

That night I didn't sleep well
and then the next morning we had a little mishap at the preschool
that triggered a bad memory from 20 years ago.

That afternoon someone called to say life at Holy Trinity wasn't
working out for them and they were going to look for another parish.

And the day after that Mom told me that 2 old family friends had died
and that another had been diagnosed with cancer,
and then that evening, the topper -
I got a FB message that one of my youth
from my last parish had died by suicide.

Now, none of the suffering happened to me directly,
and none of this was about being a priest.

These are the same sorrows and setbacks all of us go through.
This could have been your week, your story to tell,
as easily as mine.

It just caught me all at once,
and as it did I was reading Peter's triumphant, faithful confession -
"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" -
and I found myself feeling small by comparison.

Friends, I was not filled this week with the hope of the resurrection.

Instead I was filled with the 1-2-3 punch of sadness, self-doubt, and grief,
and instead of turning to the Lord for strength
I spent a few days wallowing in self-pity.

It's not exactly the same thing as questioning the divinity of Jesus,
but it feels connected because instead of turning to Jesus for strength,
I ignored him at precisely the time that having a savior
is supposed to matter.

Maybe you've had this kind of week before, too.



But then, a funny thing happened.

Thinking about Peter's confession over and over for this sermon
began to bless me instead of intimidate me.

Because I finally started to remember that Peter's day of triumph
was only one day in his long walk with Jesus,
and that the New Testament shows Peter as a man in full -
a man with triumphs and failures,
a man of fear along with courage.

And that's when I began to remember
that God's love and trustworthiness
are not dependent on my belief in them,
are not created by how smart or faithful or prayerful I am.

I know my life is so much better
when my heart and mind and hands
are fully committed to the love of God in Jesus Christ,
but this week I needed a reminder
that God's love and mercy towards me are not based
on how good or bad my commitment is in a given week.



God loves you.

God loves you and walks with you in good days and bad,
loves and walks with you on the days you know
with all your heart that Jesus is the Messiah,
the Son of the Living God,
and does the exact same thing on the days
when your hope in Jesus feels like nothing
but a sweet little made-up fairy tale.

Try to remember on those hard days that, really,
it's not about how strong YOUR belief is.

It's about God. And God is love.

“Praise to the God of my salvation. Salvation is of Christ the Lord.”

Amen.