Rescue operation: Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

by Don C. Richter in the July 29, 2008 issue

Walking on water is an iconic, superhero thing to do. In a mighty display of divine power, Jesus strolls across the Sea of Galilee and then stills a strong wind. No wonder the disciples are terrified by the ghostly apparition coming toward them. Ghosts, after all, are spirits without flesh-and-blood bodies.

Physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne likens Jesus' human/divine nature to the wave/particle duality of light. Light appears as a wave if one is asking "a wave-like question," as a particle if one is asking "a particle-like question." It's not an either/or but a both/and. With respect to Jesus, ask a divine question and watch him walk on water and calm the seas. Ask a human question and watch John the Baptist fish Jesus out of the Jordan River; then watch this newly born man, still dripping wet, trudge into the wilderness to be tempted.

Peter steps out of the boat and walks on the water toward Jesus, buoyed by courage as he locks eyes with the very Son of God. Like a toddler taking first steps, Peter keeps his footing by focusing on the waiting arms of a loving parent. But then Peter notices the strong wind pushing him and his comrades out into deep waters, and suddenly Peter is like a toddler who realizes he's defying the law of gravity. The "Rock" begins to sink like a stone.

Jesus saves a petrified Peter by summoning divine power to keep him afloat. Later Jesus will save by relinquishing divine power; coercion will hold him under while chaos drowns him. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus will save not just Peter but the whole creation. For Christians, this is the mystery of baptism, the paradoxical drowning that brings life.

In January 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington National Airport, clipped a bridge and plunged into the icy Potomac River. An essay by Roger Rosenblatt in *Time* magazine gathered up the nation's grief and gratitude for an unnamed passenger who assisted with the rescue effort. "The Man in the Water" was described as balding, probably in his 50s, with an extravagant mustache. He clung to the tail section of the airplane, and every time the police helicopter lowered

a lifeline and flotation ring to him, he passed it to another of the passengers. When the helicopter came back a final time, he had gone under.

“Like every other person on that flight,” Rosenblatt observes, “he was desperate to live, which makes his final act so stunning. For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others.”

I see Jesus as that man in the water, handing over the rope and ring to others, to everyone desperate to live. The same man who once walked on water and calmed the seas finds himself immersed in the deep with us and for our sake. Every time the lifeline is lowered to him, he places the flotation ring on a fellow passenger rather than saving himself.

Jesus hands over the lifeline to everyone who cries out, “Lord, save me!” and also to those who don’t call his name. To paraphrase Paul, the Lord of all is generous to all and makes no distinction between Jew and Greek. With Jesus as the man in the water even nonbelievers are hoisted to safety from the murky depths.

“In a mass casualty, you’ll find people like him,” one of the helicopter pilots said about the anonymous hero. “But I’ve never seen one with that commitment.” Thanks be to God, we have seen one with that commitment. And for centuries we have known his name. Jesus embodies God’s commitment to all creation, God’s own self-giving for the redemption of the world.

For my ordination I received a gift I cherish: a ceramic depiction of Jesus and his panicked disciples on a tempest-tossed boat. Jesus is stretching out his arms to pacify the wind and waves. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,” Jesus assures disciples in every age who cling to him. The church has often imagined itself as that little boat, or as an ark floating safely amid chaotic waters, emboldened because the man who commands nature and walks on water is aboard.

True enough. But Jesus is also the man in the water for all time. Every time the ark door is sealed shut against the world’s watery chaos, Jesus stays with the creatures who don’t make it on board. Jesus won’t save himself at the expense of others, but allows himself to be submerged and to perish as the flood waters rise. Jesus continues the rescue effort still, lifeline in hand, even as the storm-weathered boat and its passengers sail safely on toward shore.