

STAY AWAKE FACING UNCERTAINTY, FEAR, AND STRUGGLE

TRUSTING

WEEKEND!

KARISSA WHITCOMB-TAVEY

WITHOUT WARNING

**Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink.
Matthew 14:29-30 (*The Message*)**

When you read the story in Matthew 14:22-33, how do you imagine Peter? I see him walking on the water, overcome with excitement. Then as he notices the wind and the waves, panic sets in, and he begins to sink. Fearing for his life, he calls out for help. And Jesus reaches out and takes Peter's hand.

During his navy days, my husband taught me a lot about ocean waves. Normal ocean waves can be large without posing a serious threat to boats. But without warning, the ocean can produce massive 30-foot-plus rogue waves that can threaten even large vessels.

We go through most of our days like boats on the ocean; the waves, our ups and downs, may give us a little bounce, a rocking motion, nothing life-threatening. But some days we are hit by a rogue wave that can send us reeling. I remember a few times when I have been overwhelmed by intense grief, panic, relief, or joy. Though the emotions were different, each one overpowered me like a sudden rogue wave.

Twice these waves came as a phone call. The first informed me that a close friend had been murdered; the second, that my mother had slipped into a coma and was brain-dead. As shock, grief, sadness, and

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anger converged upon me like a flood of biblical proportion, I could not think, move, or breathe. I seemed to drift in slow motion for a moment, only to crash to earth under the crushing weight of gravity—and reality. As oxygen once again flooded my lungs and I exhaled that first breath, tears began to flow, and I started the long journey of grief and healing. Twice more I was left utterly speechless at the birth of my sons. With my first son, I was overjoyed and relieved that he was alive and healthy. With the second, I was amazed by how beautiful he was. (He wasn't really. Like all newborns, he was pinkish-blue, covered in goo, and crying; but I was in awe of the beauty God had created and helped me deliver safely into the world.)

Looking back, I can see that God was faithful in all of these moments. Though I was overwhelmed by grief, God was working a miracle, freeing my friend and my mother, from the power of death and transforming them into new creations. As brand new souls came into the world, life burst forth from nothing, simply by the power of God.

Life will send us rogue waves, but we can trust that God is with us. Whenever we are left feeling out of control—in the grief of loss, in the fear of a life-threatening diagnosis, in the excitement of a new baby, when we laugh so hard we cry, when we cry so hard we ache—God is there, holding our hand. The Master of the seas won't always calm the waters, but God can be trusted to help us walk on the waves. <

Karissa Whitcomb-Tavey of Hilton, New York, is a seminary student, a daycare worker, and the mom of three beautiful kids. She enjoys gardening and doing arts and crafts.



22 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Take a moment today to recognize God's presence in your life. Remember the times you have felt overwhelmed by circumstances out of your control. With each memory, remind yourself that God was there. Look for the ways God was at work; notice when God was reaching out to you. When rogue waves hit, allow these memories to help you trust that God wants to share in your joy *and* your sadness—that God will pull you to the surface of the water and walk with you through the waves of life.

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RIDING THE WAVES

WEEKEND!

keep just swimm JESSICA LOWE

I do triathlons. I would say I *run* them, but in a triathlon you do more than run. You swim; you bike, and then you run. It's a three-sport race that you have to be kind of crazy to do.

I am kind of crazy. I signed up for a Half-Ironman Triathlon: a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike ride, and 13.1-mile run. This particular race began with a swim in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Galveston, Texas. A long line of inflatable buoys marked the course, allowing swimmers to navigate through the water. Sounds simple enough, right?

On the day of the race, the weather was horrible—wind speeds of 30 miles an hour, a tornado watch in the area, and thunderstorms on the horizon. The Gulf waves swelled, tossing us up and down as we tried our best to stay on course.

I had trained to race that distance, but my workouts had been in a calm pool. In the stormy ocean, I couldn't find a rhythm for my stroke. Every time I turned my head to the side to breathe, I got a mouthful of salty water. Panic started rising in my chest. I wondered if I would be able to complete the race—or even make it back to shore.

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RIDING THE WAVES

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Just then I raised my head and saw an inflatable buoy only a few yards away. I told myself, *Just swim to that buoy.* And once I passed it, *Just swim to the next buoy*—and the next, and the next. I wasn't sure if I had enough strength to finish; I couldn't even see the beach. But I could see that very next buoy—and once I passed it, the next one.

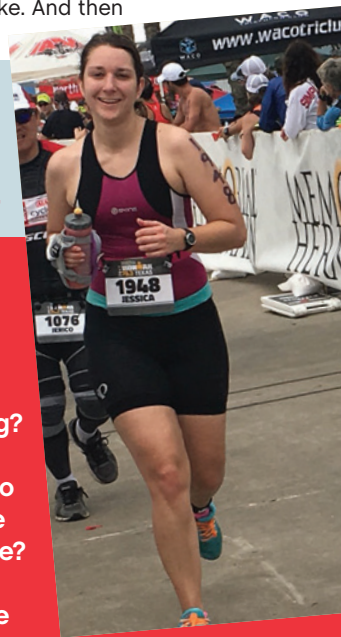
After a grueling 45 minutes in the water, I managed to continue on to the bike race and the run. But while I was struggling through that choppy water, I realized something: Just as those buoys helped to guide me through the course, God guides my life—one step at a time.

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Often I have felt the waves of life tossing and turning me. I have gasped for breath; I have lost my way and lost sight of the finish line. But in the midst of those moments of chaos and fear, I have been able to hear the still, small voice that calms me and tells me, "Just swim to the next buoy."

We can become overwhelmed worrying about what comes next: what college to attend, what major to choose, what career path to pursue, which friendships to cultivate. Yet in those moments, if we can calm ourselves and remember to breathe, even if we are unable to discern God's ultimate goal for us, often we can discern the next step God calls us to take. And then the next, and the next. <

Jessica Lowe is Associate Pastor of Grace Community United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. She's still a little bit crazy and is hoping to race another triathlon soon! >>>



27 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Where in your life are you having trouble seeing the finish line? What has become overwhelming or too hard to handle? Can you see some "buoys" along the way that make the journey less daunting?

Read 1 Kings 19:11–13. Where do you hear God's still, small voice calling you? Have you become too distracted by the big things (the wind, the fire, the earthquake) to find God in the stillness and silence?

Spend some time this week asking God to help you discern the right next step. And once you take it, ask God to show you the next and the next.

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STAY AWAKE

FACING UNCERTAINTY, FEAR, AND STRUGGLE

When Words Fail

Sarah Arthur

Several years ago, I went through a season in which migraine headaches regularly laid me up. Unable to move or open my eyes, I would lie flat on my back in bed for hours. My only coherent thought was, *Make it go away*. I had to concentrate to turn the demand into a request: “Jesus, help me.” There were simply no other words.

A young friend of mine has been confined to a wheelchair since childhood. She is often gripped by muscle spasms that make it difficult for her to breathe. In these moments, the only words she can formulate are “Don’t leave me”; and she repeats them over and over again as a prayer. When no other thoughts are possible, those three words connect her like a lifeline rising out of the murky ocean of pain to the ship of God’s presence.

Many of us have experienced the blank terror that emerges when pain or depression shoves every other thought from our minds, when we can think of nothing except making the pain go away. Even worse, we often feel cut off from God because we are unable to form coherent prayers.

More than Words

The Bible reassures us that prayer is more than words. “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness,” writes the author of Romans 8:26–27 (NRSV); “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” God is listening not only to our words but also to our hearts. Even when we are unable to speak, God hears us.

When we do grasp for words, our prayers do not have to be eloquent or long. Ancient Christians said a simple prayer called the *Kyrie Eleison*, which in Greek means “Lord have mercy.” As they breathed in, they prayed, “Lord have mercy,” and as they breathed out, “Christ have mercy.” The *Kyrie Eleison* is a way to pray when you can’t seem to string words together on your own.

I have found this prayer to be a lifeline when pain or fear sets me adrift in a sea of jumbled thoughts. Once I cling to it, I am suddenly aware that Jesus is with me. He has been there all along, but now I have a grip on his hand.

Like “Jesus, help me” or “Don’t leave me,” the *Kyrie Eleison* is a prayer of desperation, a cry for help. The difference is that it can be prayed for others as well as for yourself. Is a parent struggling with the loss of a job? *Lord have mercy*. Is a friend moving away? *Christ have mercy*. Even when we can’t find the words to pray for others, we can focus on what is important.



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Dig Deeper

Pray the *Kyrie Eleison* (“Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy.”) every day this week, when you wake up in the morning and when you go to bed at night. Use it as a breath prayer during the day. Then, the next time you are tempted to panic, instead of blathering on or being unable to pray at all, pray the *Kyrie Eleison*. You may be surprised how naturally the words come to mind when things get rough.

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IT COULD HAPPEN
TO ME

WEEKEND!

REV. J. DANA TRENT

when fears become reality

I have always been anxious. My mother deemed me a “worrywart” at age six when my bedtime prayers became a desperate cadence of catastrophic scenarios: “Please God, no fires, floods, or burglars.” I begged Mom to keep her light on until I fell asleep; the glow from her room assured me that she was still awake and watching over us.

Nighttime worries seeped into the daylight. I lived through the all-too-frequent fears of a K-12 student: guns at school; friends in car accidents. In 2001, I was a sophomore in college when two airplanes struck the twin towers of New York City’s World Trade Center on a Tuesday morning. Classes were cancelled; silence enveloped our small campus. My suitemates and I stared at our TV in disbelief. How could this happen? Soon panic ensued, and phone calls to parents were made in vain. “All circuits are busy” was the day’s mantra.

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Today, the latest crisis is broadcast in a 24/7 news cycle. Twitter feeds bring us by-the-minute updates; trending hashtags inform us of the latest disaster. Hurricanes, mass shootings, fatal rallies. How do we function when we feel we are only one planned or random act away from death?

Working as a hospital chaplain resident after college and seminary didn't lessen my fear. In that year, I saw every worst-case scenario: accidents, fires, snake bites, an innocent infection gone awry. Everywhere I turned, there was danger.

Now, as a professor, my anxiety manifests as I rehearse classroom scenarios in my mind: *What if an active shooter threatened my students' safety? How could I protect them? Could I sacrifice my own life to save the ones they are just beginning?*

"Have faith," my mother told me when I would confess my terror. "Consider the lilies," she'd add, quoting Luke 12:27-29. That was her code for "Why do you not believe God's promises?" My constant anxiety seemed counter to having deep faith in God. Yes, terrible things happen every day. Yes, we all suffer in one way or another. But instead of focusing on fear, which often brings out the worst in humanity, how can we hope, trust, and serve one another? Even when we feel that all is lost, how can we trust the promises of scripture and learn to rely on God? <

Rev. J. Dana Trent, an ordained Baptist minister and former chaplain, is professor of World Religions and Critical Thinking at Wake Tech Community College. Her third book with Upper Room Books, *One Breath at a Time: A Skeptic's Guide to Christian Meditation*, is now available.



23 NEXT DAY STRETCH

What scares you? Make a list of your worst fears. Then imagine yourself in one of those worst-case scenarios. Think about how you might cope if you knew God was present with you. What practices might help you to rely on God?

This exercise finds its roots in stoicism, an ancient form of philosophy. Some stoics would use their imagination to place themselves into worst-case scenarios. They believed that, over time, this practice helped them to realize that they could indeed survive such situations.

We too can prepare for times when our fears become reality. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and scripture reading can steady us. With practice, these tools become part of our spiritual muscle memory so that when panic strikes, we can more readily rely on God.