

**Pitt Street Uniting Church**  
**Pentecost 20C - 12 October 2025**

**A Reflection by Rev Dr Christine Gapes**  
**Gospel of Matthew 14:22-33 – Ropes of Resilience**

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Accidentally this reflection on ropes of resilience follows last week's focus on trauma.

Liriel and the Dragon is a simple children's book that is based on personal experience. I never thought I'd write a children's story but 20 years ago I had an idea.

I'm going to share some of the background to the text, but I hope you have your own interpretations. I've loved hearing what people have seen in the text and illustrations that I have not seen. I'm hoping it will be a book that encourages intergenerational conversations about difficult times and how you faced your fears and anxiety. And also, what helped you survive those times. What ropes of resilience anchored you?

The idea for the book came 20 years ago when I was made redundant.

It is said in Business that a position is made redundant - but for those in that position it definitely feels like you are personally being made redundant. It hurts a great deal, especially if you have poured your heart, time and energy into a position that is wiped out by a board meeting. When it happened to me, it felt like the ground dissolved beneath me and I was no longer standing on firm ground.

Who was I without this position?

Without this work?

Without a place in a structure?

What on earth could I do now?

Like Peter, we can often feel like we're sinking in a sea of problems and difficulties. It's even more surprising when we sink - because we thought our faith was strong enough. We had our eyes upon Jesus. We believed that we were following the right path. But then all the difficulties of life start to claw at us and squeeze us and make us wonder if we can survive.

Like Peter, we begin to sink beneath the waves of worry, dislocation, and fear.

Like the Psalmist in Psalm 40 we fall into a pit of despair. Wayne Muller in his book, *Sabbath: Finding rest, renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*,<sup>1</sup> describes the pit so well. “We are terrified of the painful grief that is hot to touch, sharp and piercing.... When we stop even for a moment, we can feel the burning, empty hole in our belly.” (p.33)

Psalm 40 was a great help to me as it described the painful experience and eventual recovery:

God lifted me out of the desolate pit,  
out of the mud and mire;  
God set my feet on a rock  
and gave me a firm place to stand.

Another thing that helped me in my years of distress was what I call spiritual imagination. I've attended several workshops on Intensive Journalling conducted by Kate Scholl and found that I prayed in images. Reeling from my redundancy, I had an image of me on the pinnacle of a very high mountain. I was kung foo kicking a gigantic dragon that was trying to devour me. I realised I was fighting a lot of dragons of self-doubt, anger, fear, anxiety and loss of faith. Gradually the image morphed and I realised the dragon could also be my power. If I faced the dragons of fear, I might find I was stronger than I thought I was.

The story of Liriel and the Dragon came to me as I moved from confronting the dragon to exploring what it meant.

Part of my healing also came from becoming the Uniting Church chaplain at Western Sydney University.

Parker Palmer<sup>2</sup> wrote after he felt he had not fulfilled his vocation in a particular setting: “As often happens on the spiritual journey, we have arrived at the heart of a paradox: each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closes, turn around - which puts the door behind us - and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls. The door that closed kept us from entering a room, but what now lies before us is the rest of reality.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Sabbath: Finding rest, renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*, Wayne Muller, Bantam Books, 2000, p.33

<sup>2</sup> *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation*, Parker Palmer, Jossey-Bass Inc, 2000, p.54

I was able to turn away from looking at the past where the landscape was burnt out and desolate and look towards a new future, where I saw a new lush green landscape as I began ministry at Western Sydney University.

There's an image in the book of Liriel dangling from a rope. The idea came from a blessing I use in the blessing basket at uni.

*Friends are what you cling on to when you're at the end of your tether and the rope's unraveling.*<sup>3</sup>

For me, the image of a rope mysteriously appearing on Liriel's back is a sign that God saves us when we fall. Even though we feel we are lost and there is nothing we can do, a magic rope appears and stops our fall. The rope is a sign of faith, a sign of resilience, a sign of prayer, a sign of God's unceasing love and care.

The threads in the rope of resilience might snap or wear thin, the faith that holds the rope together may be invisible but is always there. God doesn't abandon us even though it feels like God has.

Anne Lamott uses the imagery of "rope" to represent a state of being overwhelmed, or desperate, or clinging to the last thread of hope.<sup>4</sup> She uses this image in the context of prayer, suggesting that when we feel at the end of our rope, we can still reach out to something larger than ourselves for help. Lamott also uses the image of a rope to represent the support of others, like a church community, who help us hold on when we feel like we're losing our grip.

Sarah, the illustrator and a social worker, reminds people that difficult journeys take time and only you know when you have reached a reasonable and livable end. The dragons might still be too fierce for you to meet them. It's okay to stay in or avoid difficult and scary places till you are ready to brave the new unknown. ....

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I'm going to ask you to do something that some people don't like. Don't worry there's an alternative. I invite you to braid the coloured ribbons as you talk in pairs about the threads in your life that have created ropes of resilience. Or you can braid in silence.

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<sup>3</sup> I think this quote comes from Anne Lamott - or is a version of what she writes

<sup>4</sup> source unknown

During the Taizé chant you are invited to lay the braided ropes on the table.

You might consider

- What ropes of resilience have saved you in difficult times?
- What strands have been part of your rope?
- Who has helped you weave these ropes?

I don't want you to talk about the difficult times in your life as we don't have enough time to give them the importance and dignity they deserve.

One of my most important strands was my grandfather, George Gorton, a lay preacher for 70 years. He and Nanna would read a chapter of the bible at the breakfast table. If you visited when they were reading Leviticus or Numbers, they didn't miss a beat but read all the begats. Their commitment to reading the Bible has stayed with me as a strong sign of faith. But they were able to question the bible while standing on a firm faith in the love of God. Pop once asked me about what it meant that God created light and then a few verses later created the sun and the moon and the stars. As an eager 18 year old, I went away and did research, coming back to Pop who simply said, "God created." He could question the bible and maintain a strong faith in the power of God.

So, as you braid, talk or think about:

- What ropes of resilience have saved you in difficult times?
- What strands have been part of your rope?
- Who has helped you weave these ropes?