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Romans 10:5-15

**Matthew 14:22-23**

It was the fourth watch of the night ...the time between 3 o'clock and 6 o'clock in the morning according to the Roman and Israelite ... the time when we lift our heads up off the comfy pillow, look at the clock, and decide to sleep for another two hours.



Hakim Bello<sup>1</sup> wasn't sleeping though. Along with many others, he had been on the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean all night ... struggling to stay afloat ... fearful, anxious, desperate ... fighting to stay alive. The boy next to him toppled over. Had he fainted? Or, was he dead? A pregnant woman vomited and a child's wailing set

his already jangling nerves on an even sharper edge. Hakim's migration began in Nigeria. The first stop was Libya. Those five years working as a tailor, the good life he had built, his hope of supporting a family ... all of it seemed like no more than a fleeting dream as this boat ... if you could call it a boat ... bobbed up and down in the predawn hours. Were they still in Libyan waters? Had they made international waters? Would they be found or slip beneath the waves unnoticed?

As the morning light grew stronger Hakim thought he saw something coming toward them. Two dots on the horizon grew larger as they drew nearer and nearer. The pale red dot took shape. It was a boat with a large motor and it was closing in on them rapidly! Finally, he could see the shape of a man. The man in the boat wasn't walking on water, but he may as well have been to Hakim.



That man's name is Oscar Camp. As director of a company specializing in *for profit* commercial lifeguard and rescue services, Oscar was doing just fine as he plied the waters off the beautiful Spanish Coastline. But, one day that all changed.



Now Oscar Camps spends almost all of his time working for and helping build a non-profit non-governmental organization named Proactiva Open Arms. Proactiva Open Arms' central mission is to rescue refugees who are fleeing wars, persecution or poverty by way of the Aegean and Central Mediterranean seas. The people they rescue are people just like Hakim ... people so desperate that they cram onto boats that may or may not be seaworthy ... that may or may not have enough fuel ... and that may or may not be intercepted by authorities who will take them right back to the horrors they just left and more. Luck is their only option. If someone passes by and rescues them they are lucky; if not they die.

Oscar Camp and his fellow rescuers want to change their odds. That's why they go out every day during the fourth watch – to patrol the waters and look for those who are about to go under literally, economically, socially and emotionally. A typical operation starts before sunrise about 5:30 am.



When they reach the refugees they reach out their arms to the refugees distributing life jackets. Many of the refugees have never learned how to swim. Children get their vests first. Children are also first off the floundering vessel.



Can you imagine the thoughts, the sensations, the emotions that refugees feel as strong arms surround them and lift them onto the rescue vessel? Can you fathom what it's like to realize that your terrifying ordeal at sea will soon end?

Now multiply that feeling by 6,500. That's how many migrants and refugees were plucked from the Mediterranean on only one particularly busy day in 2016. Europe faces a migration larger than it has ever known. I'm sure you can guess what the response has been if you just consider our own. It's been mixed. After deals were brokered to close off the land routes to Europe the even more dangerous Aegean and Mediterranean routes have seen a huge rise in numbers. Some estimates put the number of people waiting to board small smuggling boat out of Libya alone at over 1 million. Besides those who perish on the sea, there will be many who die waiting.



These 112 individuals though .... They made it. After being ferried in the lifeboats to a larger ship they made it to Sicily – the island that looks like it is being kicked by the toe of the Italian Peninsula's boot. They greet their destination with sighs of relief and shouts of joy - a moment of celebration before considering all the many challenges that still lie ahead.



That is the end of this story for today. But, consider this also: every one of the 112 people in that boat has their own individual story to tell. And, some of those stories will come back to haunt them again and again: stories of near starvation, stories of torture, stories of genital mutilation and sex trafficking, stories of losing people dear to them.

Many of those who survive the journey will need someone to reach out their arms and offer help ... help to get settled with the necessities of life, but also help to pull them out of the dark waters of depression and post-traumatic stress.

All of that being said ... make no mistake about it, refugees ... migrants ... asylees, they've stayed afloat in circumstances most of us can't even begin to imagine. They are strong, resilient, creative, hardworking problem solvers. They've had to prove it to themselves and to the world time and again. They are valuable and worthy of being received with outstretched and open arms as precious children of God ...as brothers and sisters.

When pictures of dead children on the shores of the Greek Island of Lesbos started appearing in the media, something inside of Oscar Camp sprung to life. He had to do something. So, long before the helmets and hundreds of life jackets, long before the bright red/orange Zodiac lifeboats, long before the waterproof rescue gear came along ... Oscar Camp and one other fellow lifeguard flew to the island "with money from their own pockets and their arms and fins as their only resources."



“We felt,” he said “one responsibility: not let more people die in the sea. We are lifeguards. That is who we are. We save lives.”<sup>2</sup>



In 2016 “the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internationally displaced people around the world ... topped 65 million for the first time ever ... one of every 113 people in the world has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations ... each minute 24 people around the world” must “flee their home.”<sup>4</sup>



Since this service started approximately 980 people have become refugees, migrants or asylum seekers. All of them are caught in the global storm of violence, hatred, greed and corruption. All of them are praying for help ... crying for help.

God hears their cries. How do we know this?

We know this because we believe in a loving God who hears the cries of *all people* who are in dire need in body, mind or spirit.

We know this because Christ Jesus hears us and reaches out in great love to help us. And, isn't it true that very often Christ's reach comes to us through this community of faith.

Yes, without a doubt, God hears the cries of refugees, migrants and immigrants.

So, who will incarnate Christ's loving arms and reach out to them?

Who will reach out in God's love?



The shorelines, and the forests, and the towns near us are peaceful, our homes are warm and safe and comfortable. We leave them for outings, but we can always return. We are *seemingly far removed* from tumult and strife. We are *seemingly far removed* from the cries of those who have left their homes forever and now must make new homes in new places.

Still, I think if we listen attentively ... if we listen with Christ's ears we will hear those cries.  
AMEN

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#### Supporting Resources

<sup>1</sup> Hakim Bello. *I was a Lampedusa refugee. Here's my story of fleeing Libya – and surviving.* The Guardian; April 20, 2015. Web

<sup>2</sup> Proactiva Open Arms website

<sup>3</sup> Larisa Epatko. *The Spanish lifeguards who save migrants from risky waters.* PBS News Hour; January 17, 2017. Web

<sup>4</sup> Camila Domonske. *Refugees, Displaced People Surpass 60 Million for the First Time, UNHRC Says.* the two-way: BREAKING NEWS FROM MPR; June 20, 2016. Web