

The Scuba Lesson

"Look at me," Mike signaled with his hands. I shook my head in panic and kicked harder in a desperate attempt to surface. Mike's heavy grip kept me under as he signaled again, "Look at me!"

We were on the seabed, exploring the coral reef in the South China Sea. Mike, my diving instructor, had given me a short pre-dive lesson in shallow water near the beach, but now we were out in the deep, staring into the mouths of giant mollusks.

At first the dive to the underwater world had been fascinating. Life forms I had previously only seen in pictures thrived in this part of the ocean. The other divers were from a volunteer organization whose mission was environmental conservation. I was lucky to be part of the underwater excursion on this sunny September day.

Before the dive, I had asked my instructor, "Uh ... will we see sharks down there?"

"If we're lucky!" was Mike's enthusiastic reply.

I don't recall at what point I freaked out. I just know that suddenly I was short of breath and there was a pounding in my head. But a watery grave wasn't to be my fate. Mike motioned to me to pinch my nose hard and breathe through my mouth. That would equalize the air pressure in my system. I'd learned that in the lesson, but now it wasn't working. The pressure was too great, and I could feel my chest paining. My teeth clamped down on the mouthpiece of the regulator, and claustrophobia set in. My mind told me that I had to get to the surface where I could breathe normally through my nose.

That's when he gave me the signal to look him in the eye, and then motioned with his hand to relax. "Inhale ... exhale," he signed to me. "Inhale ... exhale."

I couldn't believe Mike wasn't going to help me surface. I inhaled through my mouth as normally as my brain could force my body to cooperate. Then I exhaled slowly. The bubbles ascending from my regulator told me everything was okay. Gradually, my lungs felt normal again, and before long I was breathing at a regular pace.

Mike motioned for me to swim down further in order to get a look at the clown fish and other sea creatures on the ocean floor. For the next half an hour, I explored a beautiful world of natural treasures and forgot all about my momentary panic attack. Eventually we resurfaced and were helped into the boat.

Back on shore, we laughed with the rest of the crew about the day's adventures. "You wouldn't let me come back up for air!" I jokingly protested to Mike.

"But you were okay as soon as you relaxed, right?" he said with a smile. "You had more than enough air in your tank. See, it was all in your mind. After you overcame that, you wanted to stay down there!"

Mike had over 30 years of diving experience, so I figured he knew what he was talking about. And as a certified instructor to hundreds of first-timers like me, he probably saw that panic scene a lot.

Now when I find myself under a sea of life's problems and panic begins to set in, I relate my scuba lesson to the spiritual principle of relaxing in the Lord.

Jesus tells me, "Inhale. ... Exhale. ... There's plenty of air in your tank."

Most of the time, He doesn't release me from the deep--at least not when I think it's time. He simply tells me to relax and look at Him. When I do, I regain my composure enough to enjoy the breathtaking view.

--Nyx Martinez