

“Breathing Space”

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Based upon Psalm 33:1-9, 20-22; John 20:19-31

Siblings in Christ, rejoice! The tomb is still empty, and it is still Easter, because Easter is not just a day, it is a season and a state of mind. Can you feel it? Can you feel the hope and the newness and the joy we recognized just last week? Not so much? Well that's OK; you're not alone if you can't. Even if you believe that Jesus was raised, it is still hard to feel the reality of that miracle when you are stuck inside, the Church building is still closed, and the whole world is still so messed up. It is a hard to feel joy more than fear in times such as these. That's why I am so grateful for today's text from *John*, because it reveals that even on the first Easter the disciples couldn't feel the good news either. Mary did as Jesus commanded. She went, and she told them that she had seen the risen Christ and shared everything he had said to her. Presumably she did this quite early in the day because she encountered Jesus in the garden before dawn. Yet here we are in the evening of that same day according to the story, and where are the disciples? Are they dancing in the streets and knocking on doors to share the good news? No. Are they having a huge party to celebrate the miracle? No. Are they planning how they will continue Jesus' ministry? No. They are hunkered down still afraid and still locked inside someone's home in Jerusalem. Sound familiar? Mary proclaims: “Jesus is raised!” And we respond in our hearts, “Oh that's great news, Mary, but did you stay six feet away from everyone when you were out in that public garden?” “A whole new creation has begun!” she shouts. “OK if you say so, but did you wash your hands and leave your shoes at the door when you came in?” Sometimes the Easter news is hard to swallow, not because it is a miracle, but because that miracle happened almost 2,000 years ago, and therefore does not seem to have much to do with our lives today.

Thankfully, Jesus recognized that this might be a problem. So, according to today's text, instead of just relying on Mary to be his ambassador, Jesus also chose to appear himself, literally, by somehow materializing inside the locked house where the disciples were staying. John doesn't say whether he walked through the walls or teleported in like someone from *Star Trek*, but he makes it clear that Jesus wasn't a ghost. He was solid and touchable, yet somehow also transformed. After wishing the disciples peace twice, Jesus got down to business proving that he was not a figment of their imaginations, by breathing on them. The very idea may make us flinch now because of the pandemic, but there were only blessings in his breath that day. It was truly life-giving, a fact made clear by the Greek which says that Jesus breathed “into” the disciples in the same way that God breathed into Adam and gave him life. Jesus basically gave artificial respiration to the disciples; he inflated them, according to the Greek verb used, because they were clearly still deflated following the crucifixion. But when he did, he gave them far more than oxygen to lift their sagging spirits; he gave them the Holy Spirit as well. This is John's version of Pentecost.

Later in May we will get to Luke's version of Pentecost, the more familiar, dramatic one with tongues of fire dancing on people's heads and the disciples speaking in multiple languages. There is no reason to believe that that did not happen just because John's Pentecost is different. Luke wrote well before John did. But I'm glad that John included this little private Pentecost too

because among other things, it serves as a good reminder about the importance of breathing during times of crisis, not just to stay alive, but also to be well physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Human beings typically respond to stress by breathing very shallowly, almost panting as the adrenaline and cortisol course through our systems. That isn't good for us in the long term, which is why there are so many articles and news stories lately telling people to breathe. Regardless of whether you typically respond to stress by becoming depressed or anxious, the way to begin to feel better is to breathe more deeply because when we get air all the way into the base of our lungs, it triggers a mechanism in our bodies that mitigates the stress hormones. It also gives us more oxygen, which our bodies need to be healthy. Breathing is essential to physical practices like yoga, and to spiritual practices like meditation. It can work like Valium on the body, and like prayer for the soul.

There are lots of different breathing exercises available online which are designed to get oxygen deep into your lungs and give you greater peace. One that I keep reading about is called 4-7-8 breathing. You breathe in for 4 counts, hold it in for 7, and then exhale as slowly as you can, blowing out through your mouth for 8 counts. Try it with me now. If you do ten of these in the morning and ten before bed you will do yourself a world of good because you will be giving yourself physical breathing space in your lungs, which then leads to greater emotional breathing space in your mind. And, if you practice your breathing while keeping today's text in your mind, you can find spiritual breathing space as well, which will allow you to hold onto Easter joy and peace even in times of turmoil.

Mentally picture yourself locked in that house with the disciples, afraid, depressed, and worried about what the future holds. That's not a hard stretch these days. Now imagine Jesus comes and offers to breathe for you. Open your mouth and your heart and breathe in that grace, love, and peace. Blow out the fear, sadness, and grief. In the same way that humanity began according to *Genesis 2*, by God breathing life into Adam, the risen Christ can breathe new life into us each day if we allow him to do so. So, strive each day to breathe in the Holy Spirit and the wisdom, comfort, and courage the Spirit offers.

This is not some kind of hokey new age exercise. Breathing and God have always gone together. It is even a form of worship. You might remember that I told you a couple of years ago that when the high priests entered the holy of holies in the Temple once a year on Yom Kippur, the only thing they had to do was say the four letters in the name of God: Yod. Hey. Vav. Hey. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner said that the name of God was unpronounceable because it was not meant to be said, it was meant to be breathed.¹ God's name is the sound of breathing. Therefore, all the priest had to do to say the name of God and commune with God was to breathe. Y-H-V-H or even Yah-weh. Breathe and know that God is with you because Christ was raised. Breathe and know that God has the power and desire to redeem all people and creatures and situations with divine grace.

¹ As quoted by Kipnes, Paul, "*Breathing the Name of God*," Blog, 2010, retrieved at <https://www.paulkipnes.com/breathing-name-of-god/>

Jesus gave his disciples a lot more than holy breath in today's story, however. He actually gave them all of the things that he promised he would give them before he died. In what is known as Jesus' "farewell discourse" in *John* 14 through 17, Jesus promised to give his disciples three things. The first thing was joy. "So you have pain now;" he said as he offered his final lessons, "but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice." (Jn. 16:22). Exactly as he said, he appeared to his disciples in that locked room, and "the disciples rejoiced with they saw the Lord." The second thing Jesus promised was peace. "Peace I leave you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (Jn. 14:27). Remember how Jesus said, "Peace be with you" twice when he arrived? The first time was just the standard greeting. "Hey how's it going?" But the second time was a deliberate gift: "peace be with you." This is the peace that passes understanding because it does not depend upon external conditions. It is peace that comes from God and faith. The last gift Jesus gave them was the Holy Spirit. "I will not leave you orphaned," he had told the disciples before he died. "I will send you the Holy Spirit who will lead you into all Truth. The Spirit will take what is mine and give it to you." (Jn. 14:18; 16:15). By sharing these gifts with the disciples, Jesus demonstrated again that he keeps his promises, and he equipped them for what was to come next: their commissioning. "As my father has sent me, so I send you," Jesus said. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Jn. 20:21, 23).

I always thought that those instructions didn't quite fit the context. Right after filling the disciples with God's resurrecting grace, Jesus commissions them to have power over others and gives them permission not to forgive others? That is completely inconsistent with what Jesus did on the cross, forgiving even his murderers. If he had said, "Go out into the world and share the good news," or "Go out into the world and share God's love" that would make sense. But why all this talk of forgiveness now?

Well as it turns out, although the forgive translation is the standard one, the text is not nearly that clear. The verb which is typically translated "forgive" can also mean release or liberate, and the verb that is typically translated as "retain" also means "to behave as a master or lord." So, another equally valid translation of the verse is, "If you should release another's sin the person is set free; if you lord it over anyone, then that person has been enslaved."² Why does this matter? It matters because John doesn't use the word "sin" the way that we do, to describe moral failings or behavioral transgressions. Translators chose "forgive" because they saw "sin." But in *John*, sin is a term which consistently and specifically used to describe the theological failing of being blind to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For example, after Jesus heals the blind man in Chapter 9, and the blind man finally recognizes who Jesus is and praises him as Lord, Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." The Pharisees who were near him asked, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" and Jesus responds, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."³

² King, David, Sermon "Breathing Peace," preached April 28, 2019 Spirit of Grace Methodist-Lutheran Church, available at <https://hoodriverchurch.com/sermon-breathing-peace>.

³ See O'Day, Gail R., *The Gospel of John* in *New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 847.

The significance of all this becomes clearer when we continue to read the rest of the text for today. Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared. Maybe he was an essential worker and couldn't be on lock down, maybe he was locked down elsewhere, but for whatever reason he missed seeing the risen Christ and getting filled with the Spirit. As a result, when the disciples told him what happened, he couldn't believe them. That's a theological sin according to John. But when Jesus appeared again to Thomas, he did not lord Thomas' doubts over his head. Instead, he allowed him to touch his wounds and be convinced. The only thing Jesus did was add, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Do you see what John was trying to get at here in the way he tells the story transitioning from the disciples' breathing lesson to Thomas' having his eyes opened? The disciples were not called to lord their having seen the risen Christ over anyone who could not believe in the Resurrection. They were called to set others free of their fears and doubts as Jesus did with Thomas, so that they also could believe. No one would receive or believe the good news if they went around disparaging people for having doubts. They themselves had doubted Mary. But if they gave breathing space to others, meeting them where they were as Jesus had, they would free them to see the truth. "Your job is to release people from their blindness," Jesus was telling them, "as I have released you. If you judge them for their doubts and fears, the things that make them blind to the truth, they will remain enslaved to them forever. Take the Spirit with you and inflate, don't deflate, others with the good news of God's love."

In the Mel Gibson science fiction movie *Signs*,⁴ aliens attack a man's house. Terrified for their lives, he grabs his children and heads into the basement to hide. But in the process, he forgets to bring his son's inhaler. No sooner are they locked in than the son's asthma is triggered by the stress, creating a new kind of life-threatening moment in the basement. He can't breathe. Frantic, Gibson's character does the only thing he can. He takes his son into his lap, and he tries to get him to match his breathing to his father's. "Breathe in; breathe out," he says in a calm voice. "Listen to my breathing and do the same." Eventually the son is able to calm down enough to breathe. I don't know if you can actually help someone with asthma that way because I don't have asthma. But I think that is what today's text is about, our learning how to breathe and give breathing space with the help of the risen Christ. When we are panicked, Jesus invites us to take a deep breath and fill our lungs with the good news that he truly is with us and will get us through the scary times. Then, when we can breathe again ourselves, we are called to help others do the same, not by blaming them for their shallow breathing, or blaming them for being blind, but by meeting them where they are with peace, joy, grace, and love. When we allow space for people to have doubts and make mistakes, we do what Jesus did for us. When we breathe love into them instead of judgment, we free their lungs to receive God's Spirit.

This morning we were blessed to hear Bill sing the classic hymn "Breathe on Me Breath of God" by Edwin Hatch. It is one of my favorite hymns. Listen to the lyrics again: "Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew,/ that I may love the way you love,/ and do what you would do./ 2 Breathe on me, Breath of God,/ until my heart is pure,/ until my will is one with

⁴ M. Night Shyamalan, film *Signs*, starring Mel Gibson, (Touchstone Pictures, Aug. 2002).

yours,/ to do and to endure./ 3 Breathe on me, Breath of God,/ so shall I never die,/ but live with you the perfect life for all eternity.” Hatch originally published this prayer in a private work called Between Doubt and Prayer.⁵ I wasn’t able to get a copy of that to learn what his doubts were, because the only copy is in the Yale library which is on lock down like everything else. But just knowing he put his breath prayer in a work by that title makes me like the hymn all the more because we all live between doubt and prayer, between fear that all is lost, and the joyful belief that all can be and will be made new in God’s grace. We all need help to see and to breathe. So, if you are not quite feeling Easter this year, let his prayer be your own. Breathe in God’s grace and peace and joy deeply as often as you need to manage your doubts and fears. Then go, and with love, not judgment, help others to breathe too. Amen.

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breathe_on_Me%2CBreath_of_God.