
Second Sunday of Easter
Year A

Acts 2:14a,22-32
Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

It's Time To Breathe

Jesus "breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" - John 20:22

I love the calendar of the Church. I love the feast days and all that they remind us of - all the saints that have gone before us. I love the seasons of the Church and how they echo the transitions of the earthly seasons - Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. However, two of the greatest strengths of the Church calendar can also present two of its greatest challenges.

The seasons of Advent and Lent both precede the two greatest feasts of the Church calendar, Christmas and Easter. For both Advent and Lent we spend weeks preparing our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth and then his death and Resurrection. We change the colors of the church vestments, we spend extra time with special ceremonies and rituals, we decorate our homes, we even have special meals associated with each feast at Christmas and Easter. There is so much build up that it creates a huge sense that Christmas Day and Easter Day are the final destination - the end - and yet, if we pay careful attention, Christmas Day and Easter Day actually signal the start of something and not the end. For us right now, it's easy to get to Easter and say, "Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia." and to feel like we're done - we've made it. But that doesn't seem to be how Jesus' followers felt in those days following the Resurrection.

Last week Mary Magdalene and the apostles, Peter, and John were stunned to find that Jesus' body was gone and Mary's world was turned upside down to discover that it wasn't so much that Jesus' body had disappeared, but that his body was back alive! This week in our gospel lesson, presumably after hearing from Mary that she literally almost physically ran into Jesus ALIVE back in that garden, we find the disciples hiding behind locked doors in fear that they would be next on the list of targets of the religious leaders. Is this the behavior of people who feel like everything is all done and taken care of and put back right? It sure doesn't read that way to me. They were behaving as if Easter were the end. And Jesus stunned the fearful and hiding disciples with a sort of holy "Ta-Da!" by appearing in the middle of their gathering without even going through the motions of knocking on the door. But it's all too much to take in. Like the apostle John said last week, "for as yet [the disciples] did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." (John 20:9)

And that's the rub; that's the struggle. We know that Jesus has risen from the grave, but our hearts and minds still continually have to push back against the notion that death doesn't win - **it is** not permanent. But boy, it sure can feel that way some times.

Last week I made reference to those things in our lives which we might feel are dying, or may even already be figuratively dead; locked behind closed doors; hidden from view; hiding in fear that death has won; huddled with the disciples hearing that Jesus might be alive, but not quite sure what that really means: relationships which are so fractured and painful that it's hard to ever see them coming back together again; circumstances that are so oppressive that there is no end in sight, no hope of having any respite or peace; addictions which whisper constantly in our ears, "Go ahead" when our hearts internally go limp and despondent not feeling like there can be any way to fight the temptation, ... the list could go on and on.

If there's only one person in here today feeling that hope within the circumstances of their life or their past is dead or dying then it is worth saying to us all, "Don't believe that the things in your life that are dying or dead - the things that are broken and so immovable that you feel like they've won - fight the urge to believe that those things are permanent because today we proclaim that they are NOT. Today we proclaim that Life has proven its worth. Today we proclaim that Life has proven its strength. Today we proclaim that Life has proven its dominion even over death. Yes, there is suffering and loss, brokenness and pain in this life, but the hope of heaven and the hope of the Tree of Life is a hope that can see beyond the grip of sin and death in this world and into the healing and forgiveness of God's heavenly kingdom.

And the reason that I know that Life in Christ is more powerful than the darkness that can keep us locked behind closed doors is that we breathe. We breathe. The fact that we are breathing is not some sort of inspirational call to affirm an inner strength of the human will. No. As baptized Christians, the fact that we are breathing is a holy and sacred reminder that it is not simply air that is filling our lungs, but instead, when we draw each breath it is a reminder from heaven that our lives are filled with the very Spirit of God - filling our lungs, but more importantly, enlivening our hearts and giving us hope.

Jesus "breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:22)

Wow! Wait a second! Remember how last week we saw how the Resurrection was a new creation - a Garden with a Gardener (Jesus) who was tending to the very Tree of Life that had been planted in the center of the Garden of Eden? Remember that connectedness of the Resurrection to something that God had been doing from the start? Well, here it is again!

Jesus "breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Where else do we hear of God breathing into someone? The Garden again, with Adam!

"The LORD God formed [Adam] from the soil of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

And that breath from God into Adam animated his body created from the dead dust and gave it life, and that breath from Jesus into his disciples - behind those locked doors where they huddled in fear for their lives - gave them much more than earthly life, it gave them permanent life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; life that could not be stolen or taken away. Because God had already proven his Spirit to be greater than anything that Satan and death could throw at it because Jesus' body had been killed but his body also refused to bow to death and stay dead because Jesus was alive!

So when we breathe within a life in the Spirit we breathe spiritual sustenance, we breathe rejuvenation, we breathe growth, we breathe courage, we breathe perseverance, we breathe healing, we breathe hope because we breathe Life into the suffering places of this world and into the brokenness in our lives. And Paul tells us in his letter to the Christians in Rome, "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (Romans 5:5)

Therefore, let us not look at Easter as the end of Lent, but rather, the beginning of Life - new Life like the dawning of creation itself. And out of the dust of the grave - just when you could think that death had won - there comes a breath to fill our lungs and animate our souls with the very Spirit of God himself meant to bring peace and hope and to unlock the doors that we hide behind and to welcome us into a new Garden of faith in Jesus Christ. And in the words of the disciple Thomas, our friend who at first wasn't quite sure that Life had conquered death, let us all boldly proclaim his Resurrection words this day, "My Lord and my God!" *Amen.*