

A DIVINE BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Sermon, April 28, 2019

Texts: John 20:19-31; Acts 2:14, 22-39

Last Sunday during the Time with the Children I talked about the “grammar punctuation” of Holy Week ... how an exclamation point is a good punctuation for Palm Sunday, as the exclamatory “Hosannahs” and “Alleluias” rang out as the people welcomed their hoped-for Deliverer; how a question mark on Holy/Maundy Thursday might best exemplify the bewildered bafflement many must have felt as Jesus was betrayed, arrested and put on a mockery of a trial; and how a period, a full stop, would have been the apparently obvious punctuation of Good Friday. But how do we punctuate Easter? How do we punctuate “He is Risen?” Today, of course, we say “He is Risen!” with an exclamation point, but that first Easter Sunday, I think it was different. For those early followers of Jesus, the need for a question mark is there as well. I’m sure the disciples asked themselves and each other, “*He is risen?! He is risen, indeed?!*” Again, for those early followers of Jesus, Good Friday would have been easy to “punctuate;” use a period. A period is a full stop. Jesus was dead. It was finished; those close by Calvary even heard Jesus Himself say from the cross, “It is finished” and misunderstood that He was affirming, “*That’s it. All over.*”¹ (But to quote Yogi Berra, *it ain’t over until it’s over!*) He was dead, He was entombed; it seemed the end, period, full stop. But on Sunday, they find the stone is rolled away. As we read last week, an angel speaks to them, “*Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen (and he probably used an exclamation point!)*” The women certainly experienced a confusing mixture of hope and doubt and even fear, so much so they were struck dumb; they couldn’t even speak. Easter IS an exclamation, but an exclamation that needs some explanation! **He is risen?!**

As I highlighted last week, according to Mark, the angel had told the women: “*Go, tell His disciples AND PETER He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him.*” Imagine what those words meant to Peter. I can see him asking, “*He is risen?! And you are telling me the angel really said to make it a point to tell me, Peter?*” Imagine the women saying, “*Yes! The angel said TELL PETER.*” Of all the disciples, Peter is especially picked out ... as if to specifically assure Peter, who may have serious doubts about whether Jesus could ever forgive him for how Peter denied Him three times. Of course, Jesus can forgive you for what you have done, Peter, and He will! He wants to keep this Gospel story going in your life and in the lives of all those your life will touch! And the angel wants all Peters to know Jesus is alive and waiting to meet you, **right there in the Galilee where you live!** And Peter, if you want to discover the wonderful grace of forgiveness, if you want to discover real purpose for your life, if you want to be a blessing to yourself and a blessing to others, **GO FIND HIM!** Encounter Him, engage with Him, and allow Him to grace YOU and start adding your own chapters to this glorious Gospel! (OK, that’s the end of the review of last week’s sermon.)

One other point to note that I had to edit out of last week’s sermon due to time constraints: Most of you know Peter’s birth name was Simon, not Peter. Peter ... that was the name Jesus had given him. When Simon was the first to make the confession, “*You are the Christ, the son of the Living God ...*”, Jesus had responded, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are [now] Peter, (from the Greek “Petros”, which means “rock.”) and on this rock I will build my church.*” Jesus had honored Simon by giving him a new name, which was both an endearing nickname (“*Rocky*”) and something like the conferring of a title. “*You are Peter, the Rock. And on this Rock, on the foundation of this confession you have made, I will build my church.*” And now, Peter learns ... “*Jesus wants to see me?! And He is STILL calling me by that special name He gave me, even after what I did?!*” Note, the angel did NOT say, “*Go tell the disciples and that other blockhead who denied Jesus, the one who may as well be called Simon again because he doesn’t deserve the name Peter anymore ...*” No! The angel said, “**Tell Peter.**” Peter, you were given a new name by Jesus, and you still have that name ... because Jesus loves you, and is waiting for you not to lecture you, but to grace you!

Commentators speculate there may have been something of a private meeting between Jesus and Peter on Easter day. Luke 24 tells of two men who had been on the road to Emmaus, and they come running into the upper room with their great news that they had seen Jesus, but before they can say a word the disciples say to them: “*The Lord has risen and has appeared to Peter!*” In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul writes that after the resurrection, Jesus “*first appeared to Peter and then to the twelve.*” The apparent purpose of this private encounter of Jesus and Peter was the reestablishment of the relationship between Peter and Jesus -- the conferring of grace and peace, and the affirmation of Peter’s original proclamation. Peter was the first to say Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, so it is fitting he is the first of the twelve to witness the established irrefutable proof of it.

In today’s Gospel reading it was the night of that first Easter Sunday. The rest of the disciples were hiding behind a locked door. They had heard Jesus was alive, but they didn’t know what to make of that. The text tells us they are huddled together behind this locked door “for fear of the Jews.” Well, all the disciples are Jewish, so that

¹ This was from the Easter sermon of 2017, see <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/it-aint-over.pdf>

means they are in fear of their own people. Yes, they feared their own people ... because of their association with Jesus. Just as a brief aside, Christians in Sri Lanka certainly know what that feels like. Christians throughout the Middle East know what that feels like. Christians in Nigeria and other places around the world today know that that feels like ... *to be persecuted by your own countrymen simply because of your association with Jesus.* For our brothers and sisters in the faith in many places today, for them to gather together involves great risk ... because of their association with Jesus. As Christians, we still gather freely and without fear in this nation; I don't want to be overly pessimistic, but how long will that last? The depressing reality is that religious gatherings are increasingly becoming targeted throughout the world ... even yesterday we had that terrible incident at the San Diego synagogue.

And maybe as the disciples huddled together in that locked room, perhaps they even feared Jesus, in a way. I'm sure they each remembered saying to Jesus at some time or another, *"Jesus, I will never let you down. Jesus, I will never forsake you. You can count on me."* But when it came to the hard and brutal reality of the cross, they *did* all abandon Jesus. They certainly felt they had failed. And now they hear "He is risen?!" So maybe they stayed in their little room behind their locked door partially out of fear of their own Savior and Lord, a fear brought on by a sense of shame. On a somewhat related note, we disciples of Jesus still tend to do that sort of thing when we fail. We don't want to be seen, we avoid the presence of our own people, and we even avoid the presence of Jesus. We don't like being around others when we fail, especially if we think they know what we've done ... which is understandable, but also tragically ironic, because one of the best places to be when you have failed is in the company of a gracious, forgiving, nurturing fellowship of your people who are gathered together around the worship of a gracious, forgiving, nurturing Savior. After all, that is what the church strives to be, or should strive to be, because at the center of the Gospel is the proclamation that in Jesus Christ, God has come looking for us! According to our text today, Jesus even walks right through our locked doors in order to come grace us. He shows us His wounds from the cross, the wounds which are the marks of our forgiveness ... *"Yes, you may have sinned. Yes, you may have failed. But look at these marks, evidence that your sin has already been paid for."* Then He says again, *"Peace be with you!"* And there it is ... that's the Gospel! In Jesus Christ, God has come looking for us. In Jesus Christ, we can be forgiven, precisely because of what He endured on the cross. In Jesus Christ, peace can be restored to our troubled souls, and we can be freed from our locked, lonely isolation caused by our fear and shame.

After granting peace, we are told Jesus then **breathed** on them ... think about how physically close the disciples must have been to Jesus to feel His actual breath upon them. Although it doesn't say this in the text, at the risk of being slightly irreverent I think we can safely assume it was a refreshing breath, not the stale, fetid, musty, repulsive halitosis of someone who has been in a tomb three days! I'm sure it was a sweet breath; it was the invigorating breath of life, the same divine breath of God which breathed life into Adam (*in fact, the Hebrew word for Spirit is also the word for breath, as is the Greek word "pneuma" ... from which we derive the English "pneumatic"*). And then He said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit (which can be understood, "Get ready to receive the Holy Spirit when He comes, and He will come soon with power, and here is a 'taste' of that Holy Wind of Pentecost.")* When we talk about something or someone as "a real breath of fresh air," we mean that person or thing is exhilarating, refreshing, new, thrilling, invigorating. One source I consulted says the idiom "a breath of fresh air" that was used in the 1800s was actually "a breath of heaven."

After breathing on them with the gracious, life giving, invigorating Breath of Heaven and telling them to get ready to receive the Spirit, He then said to them, and to us, *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."* Now, what does that mean? In the very short time I have remaining I just want to point out that He's not making the forgiveness of others contingent upon whether we forgive them or not. No, God will certainly forgive others regardless of what we might or might not do. We don't need to add anything to Jesus' work; on the cross Jesus completed all of the work necessary for our forgiveness and the forgiveness of all He should call. He is calling His forgiven disciples to have a refreshing, life giving, divine breath-of-fresh-air ministry of their own, proclaiming grace and forgiveness in the name of Jesus to all who would hear ... come in faith and repentance to Jesus, and receive His grace. And in part He is inferring, *"Look, now that God has forgiven you, who are you not to forgive? Are you greater than God?"* As we pray each week, *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* One reason we disciples are called to forgive the sins of others is in part to experience a bit of the divine Breath of Heaven ourselves. Some of us have had our hearts broken, some of us have been betrayed, some of us have lost our ability to trust others, and that's why we sometimes have the doors of our own hearts all locked up. In the words of Lewis Smedes, *"When you forgive, you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you."*

As again we mentioned last week, and I underscore today ... Peter certainly got the angel's message as recorded by Mark, "TELL PETER." Peter accepted the grace and divine breath of forgiveness, went on to live up to his Christ-given namesake, and conveyed that gospel of gracious forgiveness to all who would hear! As we read in Acts 2, he proclaimed the exclamation point of Easter to a crowd of thousands ... *"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."* When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, *"Brothers, what shall we do?"* Peter replied, *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you, too, will receive the Divine Breath of Heaven, the refreshing, rejuvenating, life-giving gift of the Holy Spirit. (OK, I embellished a bit). The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."* Amen.