

A BREATH OF HEAVEN

Sermon, April 24, 2022

Second Sunday of Easter

Text: John 20:19-31

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 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." 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, the women went to the tomb and found the stone had been rolled away. As we read last week, in Luke 24, two angels appeared, probably grinning from ear to ear, and one of them says, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen (and he probably would have used an exclamation point)!" The women certainly experienced a confusing mixture of hope and doubt and even fear. Easter IS an exclamation, but an exclamation that needs some explanation that first Easter! He is risen?! He is risen, indeed?!"

In today's Gospel reading it was the night of that first Easter Sunday. We're told the disciples were hiding behind a locked door. They had heard Jesus was alive, but apparently they didn't quite 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 means they are in fear of their own people. Yes, they feared their own people. On one hand, we perhaps understand that better now than ever before after these past two years; you might say they were practicing social distancing, huddled in a locked room, in "fear" of their own friends and family, afraid to go out. On the other hand, it was because of their association with Jesus that they feared their own people ... and most of us really don't know what that is like. But Christians in Iran and Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East know what that feels like. David Curry, president of mission organization Open Doors USA, asserts, "Every Christian in Afghanistan today is either on the run or in hiding." Christians in Nigeria, China, North Korea, Somalia and at least forty other nations around the world today know what that feels like ... to be in fear of persecution by your own people simply because of your association with Jesus. According to an Open Doors World Watch publication, in 2021 approximately 360 million Christians, or one in seven Christians around the world, suffered significant persecution for their faith; close to six thousand were killed, martyred, for an average of approximately sixteen a day. For many our brothers and sisters around the globe today, for them to gather together involves great risk ... because of their association with Jesus.

When commenting on this exact theme from this same passage of John on the second Sunday of Easter in 2019, I noted: "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?" Well, as it turned out, it lasted less than a year! The very next Holy Week we were forbidden from "gathering freely and without fear." That was the first and only Holy Week in the entire history of our nation that the churches across our land were closed and we were forbidden to gather to worship as a congregation ... just five of us were permitted to gather here to commemorate this holiest of weeks via the internet from an empty sanctuary. For me, the experience was somewhat surreal and, frankly, sobering. There was something so eerily unnerving about how easily that was pulled off. But, I digress. Back to the story.

And maybe as the disciples huddled together in that locked room out of fear of their own people, perhaps they even feared their own Savior and Lord, 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 and/or what we've failed to

do ... which is understandable, but also tragically ironic, because one of the best places to be when you have failed is in the physical company of a gracious, forgiving, nurturing, encouraging fellowship of your people who are gathered together around the worship of a gracious, forgiving, nurturing and encouraging 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 not to dis-grace us, but to GRACE us! According to our text today, Jesus even walks right through our locked doors in order to come find and grace us. He shows us His wounds from the cross, the wounds which are the marks of our forgiveness. And says to us disciples again and 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, restored, precisely because of what He endured on the cross. In Jesus Christ, *shalom*, peace, wholeness can be restored to our troubled souls, and we can set free from our locked, lonely isolation brought on by our fear, our guilt and/or our 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 halitosis of someone who has been in a tomb three days! I'm sure it was a sweet breath of One Who was fully and vitally alive; it was the invigorating breath of life, the same divine breath of God which sweetly 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 powerful Holy Wind of Pentecost which will soon come to you from heaven."* 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, inspiring, invigorating, even life giving. One source I consulted says the idiom *"a breath of fresh air"* that was used in the 1800s was actually *"a breath of heaven."* Another related idiom is "a breath of spring." Refreshing. Inspiring. Life giving.

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 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. I think He is calling His forgiven disciples to have a refreshing, gracious, life giving, divine breath-of-fresh-air ministry of their own. Be a fresh and inspiring "breath of heaven" wherever you may go and whatever you may do, proclaiming grace and forgiveness and peace and life in the name of Jesus to all you may encounter. And in part He is also 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."* If God were to *really* do that, some of us might be in trouble! One reason we disciples are called to forgive the sins of others is in part to experience a bit of that refreshing divine Breath of Heaven ourselves. Some of us have had our hearts broken, some of us have been hurt, 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."*

Or, as a meme I saw recently posted on Facebook by one of our members expressed it, *"Holding a grudge doesn't make you strong; it makes you bitter. Forgiving doesn't make you weak; it sets you free."*

The author of John's Gospel ends the chapter with these words, *"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you have life in His name."* As noted, John has been incredibly and intentionally selective in the compiling of his Gospel account. He is saying in so many words, *"I have far more sources, far more memories of things that Jesus did and said, so many things about Him that I haven't used."* To get an idea of just how selective he was, scholars of John's Gospel who've meticulously read through these pages point out that John covers only twenty or twenty one days in the course of Jesus' earthly lifetime. This is hardly a full biography; he's very selective. And as I've noted more fully the last two times when we've looked at this text on this Second Sunday of Easter, John's is the only Gospel that tells us anything at all about the disciple Thomas. So you get the idea John wants us to take a good look at this particular disciple, which I didn't do today, other than to just now make this end note: When John records Thomas saying, *"My Lord and my God,"* a remarkable confession for a monotheistic Jew, to call another human being "My God", and the only place in all four Gospels where Jesus is directly addressed as God ... that is arguably THE climactic encounter of this whole book that is *"... written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you might have life in His name"* ... and go on to be a life-giving, refreshing, gracious Breath of Heaven to others.