

“Breathing Space”

Psalm 16, John 20: 19-31

Easter 2/A, May 1, 2011

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Here we are, a week after our glorious Easter celebration and everything is now back to “normal.” Like Pontius Pilate who asked to define “truth” we might ask to define “normal.” We gather this morning, as we do every Sunday, in the name of the risen Christ. We have entered the season of Eastertide. No one day celebration for us. We get fifty days of Easter until we reach the day of Pentecost. The gospel story does not take place a week later, but later on that first Easter day. Mary and the other disciples have left the empty tomb behind. Their grief has been transformed into rejoicing. Having seen the risen Christ they now believe and can’t wait to tell others. They bravely return to their community, to those who love and know them best, to proclaim the unthinkable, the unimaginable; Jesus has been raised from the dead. As day approaches night it is time to take a deep breath. The disciples know what Mary and the others have been saying. Now they gather together hoping to make sense of these stories and figure out what this resurrection might mean, today and into the future.

These disciples lack the same confidence Mary exhibited as she rushed to tell the others she had encountered the risen Lord. We find them in the upper room where they have locked the door behind them. They don’t want anyone knowing where they are or perhaps they don’t want anyone leaving until they figure this whole thing out. That is what happens when you have been touched by the Spirit. It is not enough to allow the mystery to dwell within you. Your fears and doubt take over and ruin the whole thing. Mary was sure she had seen Jesus, the very same Jesus with whom she had walked and eaten and learned from for years. Jesus is now the same but different. She could not explain it but she knew this was not the gardener impersonating her friend, as she mistakenly thought, it was in fact Jesus.

With doors locked and anxieties high, I suspect there was a fair amount of doubt swirling around that room. Thomas takes the rap for being the lone doubter, but the disciples’ actions lead me to believe they may have doubted Mary’s bold proclamation. How on earth could Jesus have met Mary? After all, they had all seen him die, wrapped him in burial cloths and laid him in the tomb. They have been grieving for three days uncertain what to do next. Perhaps they have not only been grieving their friend’s death but lamenting how poorly they behaved in the hour of Jesus’ greatest need; denying him, abandoning him, disbelieving what he had taught them. Even in the midst of all this uncertainty, what I love most about these disciples is how very human they are.

They decide to regroup. We find them in a room together; perhaps the same room in which they shared the last Passover meal with Jesus, desperately hoping to make sense of what is happening. Suddenly, Jesus is there, in their midst. He says “Peace be with you.” No fear. No scolding. No turmoil, just peace. This mysterious encounter with the risen Jesus shakes them from their stupor. Jesus’ greeting is meant to calm their fears and allay their doubts. It is Jesus. He is back. He shows them his wounds and they are

certain it is he. Jesus knows he has precious little time with them so he commissions them for their ministry saying, “as the Father has sent me so I now send you.” Jesus does not have time for doubts or questions. He blesses and equips them with the Holy Spirit. This is John’s Pentecost. It does not take place 50 days later as we read in Acts. Pentecost happens in this moment when Jesus breathes on them and gives them the power to heal and forgive and empower others. That Spirit of life, what we call zoe, that was released at the resurrection is now bestowed upon them giving them whatever they need to carry on Christ’s ministry. Our life in Christ is not possible without this Spirit.

Everyone apparently made it to that meeting except Thomas. We don’t know why he was not there, but we can be thankful he missed it. In his absence, he gives voice to the skepticism we so often feel. I want proof, Jesus. Give me a sign, Jesus. This sounds too good to be true, Jesus. The other disciples were privileged to see the evidence of the crucifixion and now they were expecting latecomer Thomas to simply take their word for it. But Thomas is angry and jealous and feeling left out. Jesus shows Thomas what the others saw a week later when he returns. Thomas responds with his own profession of faith. Before Jesus departs he offers a powerful blessing. As Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message* Jesus says to the rest of us, “even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.”

We are among the millions of faithful who believe without seeing. We may not see Jesus’ wounds as they did, but God provides us with evidence every day. In many dramatic ways in our own lives and the life of the church, we see resurrection and experience new life. We put our hands in the wounds of this broken world, and experience that resurrection hope that teaches us wounds can heal and brokenness can mend.

William Sloane Coffin, a great prophet of the United Church of Christ who died several years ago, once said, “As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight... You can’t think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart’s a stone, you can’t have decent thoughts... either about personal relationships or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.” Jesus gives us the breathing room we need to think straight when he bursts into our lives. He invites us to take a deep breath, release our fears, to breathe in the Holy Spirit and prepare ourselves to move forward. The good news comes to the disciples, despite their fears, and makes their minds “limber.” Jesus dissolves their fear with the gift of peace. It is a gift offered to us over and over again, ours to accept or reject. Jesus offers not only the gift of peace, but the power to forgive and the encouragement to love. This is all we ever need to become the body of Christ in the world. Our mission is to become like Christ to one another; to love deeply, seek justice and share the forgiveness we have received from Jesus. Parker Palmer in his book *The Company of Strangers* reminds us that our mission as the church is simple. He writes, “The mission of the church is not to enlarge its membership, not to bring outsiders to accept its terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way.”

That is why Jesus gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. He breathes on his disciples empowering us to live this love. When we get caught in our fear we forget what it is like

to love and be loved. When we get caught in our fear we forget how healing it is to forgive and be forgiven. Thomas and the other disciples remind us that perfection is not a criterion for discipleship. An honest, questioning, doubting faith is essential. Openness to the holy, mysterious power of God is essential. A desire to love and share love is essential. This is what we need to fulfill our mission. There are many folks who have been talking about the church's mission. The Holy Spirit has been present for every conversation and will bless us as we continue to share and discern. No matter what we decide about our ministry or our system of governance one thing is clear. Jesus continues to empower his disciples to love the world as deeply as he has loved us. Breathe in, breathe out. The invitation this morning is to let go of your fear, receive the Holy Spirit and share with the world how the risen Christ has changed your life. Amen