

Second Sunday after Easter – 2023

Gospel: John 20. 19-31

And Jesus breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

This is something we want to hear personally and in our churches. The Spirit blows where it wills and wherever it blows, it brings new life and vitality.

We need that spirit-filled experience just as those women and men gathered in an upper room needed not only to hear that Jesus has risen but rise themselves through spiritual revival.

God’s breath brings us back to life and sets us on a path of healing and spiritual transformation.

Today’s scriptures have too much going on to cover in just one sermon.

Breathe! Think! Expand! These are some of the themes from this week’s lectionary readings.

The disciples experienced a special kind of resurrection. Jesus encountered his disciples as embodied and still bearing his wounds. And Jesus breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

God’s breath is something we want to feel both personally and within our churches and community. Jesus breathed on his disciples, giving them a form of spiritual revival, enlivening them by his power and energizing them for their mission.

God’s Spirit still breathes through us as the source of possibility and the energy to achieve God’s vision in our time.

The passage from John’s Gospel now turns to focus on one of the most faithful of disciples, the much-maligned doubting Thomas.

This Sunday, I am sure that Thomas will be the object of criticism among many preachers and the focal point of many – that will centre on Thomas’ inability to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead and counsel us to believe without evidence or encounter with the Risen Christ.

I feel it is a bit unfair to brand him as Doubting Thomas. We heard on Good Friday that Peter betrayed Jesus three times, yet no one calls him Betraying Peter.

He wasn't the only disciple in the Gospels to express disbelief or doubt at the reports of resurrection.

Peter and John both had to see the empty tomb for themselves rather than rely on the word of some hysterical women. But it's also unfair because it doesn't quite fit with who Thomas is.

When all evidence pointed to the contrary, Thomas stuck around, in spite of his doubts, waiting to see if Jesus would return.

In contrast, I believe that Thomas demonstrates one vision of a healthy faith.

When Jesus appears to Jesus' followers, Thomas was not present. He returns to what an outsider might view as a mass hallucination, brought on by shock and grief. Everyone's overjoyed except Thomas. No doubt, he felt totally out of place.

Yet, Thomas does something amazing. He doesn't abandon the cause of Jesus, nor does he deny the resurrection. He simply wants to experience Jesus' presence, to know that Jesus is alive, before he believes.

Thomas' doubt is a quest for faith. It is not doubt for doubt's sake. His quest was not just intellectual, it was experiential and spiritual.

He wanted to see Jesus, feel his breath, and touch his body. He wanted the real presence of the risen Christ not just to talk about it.

When Jesus returned to the group, Thomas was amazed and transformed, and able to breathe again. The tradition says Apostle Thomas went to India in AD 52 and established 7 churches. As some of you know I also belong to St Thomas' Christian tradition.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Thomas is the only disciple with the courage to follow Jesus, no matter the cost. Not Peter the Rock. Not John the Beloved. Not the Sons of Thunder. Not the Zealot.

When Jesus hears that his dear friend Lazarus has died, the other disciples try to talk him out of returning to Bethany to mourn. The last time they were all there all hell almost broke

loose. They were threatened with death, run out of town, made to feel, in no uncertain terms, wholly unwelcome.

The disciples believed that returning to Bethany, even to mourn the dead, would end in the death of them all. So, while the other disciple's hem and haw about not going, Thomas alone speaks up.

Thomas alone stands in solidarity with Jesus.

"Let us go with him," Thomas says, "so that we may die with him."

These are not the words of a doubter.

These are not even the words of a believer.

These are the words of a follower of Christ.

Yet, the Jesus he encounters is still amazing to us. In a world where God is identified with power, and some see Christ as coming down from heaven to destroy the earth, the Jesus Thomas discovers is known by his wounds.

God in Christ suffers and still suffers the pain of crucifixion.

God in Christ is still wounded. God identifies with the pain of Jesus, indeed, feels Jesus' pain intimately, and God also identifies with our pain.

Jesus gives us breathing space. He breathes in and on us, giving us new life and energy to face our own trials and challenges.

We need to open ourselves to divine breath and out of the spaciousness give grace and love to others.

The Gospel reading ends with curious and liberating words; words that invite us to be creative and do greater things than we can imagine. John 20:30 proclaims: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book."

In other words, there is more to Jesus than what we can find on the printed page, even on the printed pages of scripture. John doesn't limit Jesus' message nor the Spirit's movements to the pages of a book or recitations of doctrinal orthodoxy.

The Risen Christ is always more than we can imagine and is never confined by our religious worldviews.

In conclusion, the Gospel reading from John 20:19-31 invites us to experience the breath of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and communities.

It challenges us to recognize the value of doubt and skepticism as a quest for faith, rather than a rejection of it.

It reminds us that Jesus' message and presence cannot be confined to printed words or rigid religious orthodoxy but is always alive and moving in unexpected ways.

Let us open ourselves to the breath of God and the possibilities of the Risen Christ, and be transformed into faithful followers who embody God's love and grace in the world.

AMEN