“Fresh Air”

Sarah Wolf

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Genesis 2:4b-7

John 20:19-31

Well, friends, it’s been a week. Not since John left….well, I guess it has been a week for that, too.

But also…

One week ago, we were crammed into this sanctuary — both services! Proclaiming the resurrection of our Lord. We baptized, we confirmed, we sang, we celebrated communion together.

And then we went home to our Easter dinners with family and enjoyed our time with them, maybe trying to keep the conversation from verging into unsafe topics, maybe laughing until we cried over family memories.

What a day!

But then Monday came and the gloriousness of Sunday started to fade a little bit. The to-do lists we had compiled on Friday were sitting on our desks waiting to be ticked off, the homework assignments we’d put off all weekend were due, and wouldn’t you know it, that pile of laundry did not fold itself.

The celebration of Easter Sunday quickly fades in our memories.

How quickly we forget.

Today’s Gospel lesson also takes place after the excitement of Easter morning has ended and the realities of the world have confronted Christ’s followers.

It’s evening on that first Easter and the text tells us that the disciples are locked away in a house because of their fear. John tells us it is because of the fear of the Jews, but what the disciples are afraid of is not the Jewish people, but the religious authorities. The Jewish religious authorities had just conspired with the Roman government to kill their leader, and so it was only logical that they would be next.

They knew what Mary Magdalene had told them — that she had seen the Lord, that Jesus had appeared to her and directed her to share with the disciples that he had risen and would soon ascend to his Father in heaven. They had listened to Mary, but she was just a woman, prone to hysterics as most women were. There’s no way she had seen the risen Lord.

The disciples have locked themselves in out of fear and despair. Jesus was killed only three days before, and now his body is gone, too. This movement they’ve thrown themselves behind has come to a screeching halt. It is evening, the darkness of the night closing around them, reminding them of the darkness of the world. So they hide away, defeated and demoralized.

But then, suddenly, Jesus appears before them — the logistics of a locked door seemingly not a problem for him.

Jesus’s first words are words of peace — Peace be with you.

These words were a common greeting during that time — “Peace be with you” — but in this case, Jesus is saying more than just a friendly hello to the disciples. He is literally giving his peace — his shalom — to the disciples.

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Then he does a remarkable thing. Jesus breathes on them, telling them to receive the Holy Spirit. In this moment, the disciples are transformed from disciples — ones who follow, who are students, who have been learning from Jesus — to apostles — ones who are sent by Jesus to teach Christ’s lessons and to share the love of God in Christ to others.

Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit which will sustain them in their ministry — as difficult as that ministry is going to be. Jesus understands that they cannot go it alone, and so he sends his own spirit with them.

American singer-songwriter, Townes Van Zandt suffered from schizophrenia and manic depression in the early ‘60s. His family forced him to undergo a now-discredited treatment called insulin coma therapy in which “people were injected with large doses of insulin in order to produce daily comas over several weeks.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

As a result of this treatment, breathing could become slow, difficult, and loud. In 1969, he penned the song, “Lungs” which harkens back to his time spent in treatment. In the first line of the song he rasps, “Well, won’t you lend your lungs to me? Mine are collapsing.”

I imagine this to be the silent plea the terrified disciples made to Jesus that Easter evening. Lord, won’t you lend your lungs to us? Ours are collapsing — from fear, from exhaustion, from disbelief. We are weary, we can’t breathe. Won’t you lend your lungs to us?

Jesus does just that. Jesus gives the gift of his breath to the disciples, offering to breathe for them.

And Jesus’s breath is powerful. The word in Greek here only appears one other time in the entire Bible and it’s back in the Genesis passage that we read a short while ago. The same spirit that Jesus gifts to the disciples is the same spirit that God breathed into the first human at creation. It is a powerful gift.

In the moment that Christ breathes for the disciples, he sends his Spirit which will sustain them in the days, weeks, months, years to come. It is the fresh air they’ve been seeking in the claustrophobia of that evening.

But he doesn’t offer his Spirit just for them just for that evening. He challenges them. He sends them. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

This fresh air is to be shared with others. Jesus commands the disciples to share his Spirit with those who are also locked away — literally or figuratively. Christ’s Spirit is one of liberation, meant to be offered to everyone who finds themselves trapped by terror or desperation or by the fear of not being enough.

Everyone is afraid of something.

This week during chapel with the preschoolers, I had a plan to talk with them about Psalm 23 and just like many lesson plans go, my plan flew right out the window when we got to the part about God being with us in dark and scary places. Once we got to that part of the psalm, our youngest Covenant friends began to name the things that frighten them — bad dreams, scary things at night, being alone. The fears of these kiddos are very real to them.

And I don’t know about you, but lately, I feel like my own lungs are collapsing. Every time I turn to the news, I see another story that makes me catch my breath. Whether it’s the church bombings in Sri Lanka last week or the shooting in a San Diego synagogue yesterday or an African American man telling police officers that he literally cannot breathe….these stories can make me feel like my own lungs are collapsing.

So what are we to do when we find ourselves paralyzed by fear?

When we find ourselves in those situations — because remember, following Christ doesn’t exempt us from fear and pain — when those feelings of despair pop up, we need to return to this text and remember the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus bestowed upon his disciples in this mini-Pentecost text.

We can turn to today’s text and remember that Christ sends his peace, not just to the disciples, but to us as well and that just as the disciples received Christ’s peace, we also are invited to receive it and to show that peace that only comes from Christ to the world.

My Christian Education professor in seminary had the habit of starting every class session with prayer. He would have us close our eyes and take in slow, deep breaths. As our eyes were closed and we were centering ourselves in prayer, Rodger would say quietly, “Breathe in God’s mercies” and we would inhale deeply and then he would say, “Breathe out God’s mercies to others” and we would exhale just as deeply. He would repeat these instructions a few times before he would launch into the heart of his prayer.

In these moments of exhalation — of breathing out God’s mercies to others, I would keep my eyes closed and picture the areas of my life and the areas of the world in which God’s mercy was needed. I knew it was mostly a symbolic way to start a prayer, but I loved the image in my head of my breath joining in with the Holy Spirit as my prayers swirled through the cosmos toward the people and places for whom I felt called to pray.

Lutheran pastor John Stendahl discusses our call to reach out to others saying, “If this breath of ours is indeed that of Jesus, moreover, it is not in our lungs only for the purpose of sustaining our flesh with life-giving oxygen. It is there for us to breathe out as well, giving it the shape of words, expressing it in speech and sign to inspire others.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Receiving Christ’s spirit means receiving the gift of a life in Christ, but if we are to accept this gift, freely given, it means following in a long line of other faithful disciples throughout the years who have shared the peace of Christ with their neighbors as well as their enemies.

We might think of this text in John as John’s Pentecost. It is very similar to the Pentecost in Acts in which many receive the Holy Spirit and are then sent out to share that Spirit with the world. But the tone of John’s Pentecost is very different from that of Luke’s in Acts. Once the disciples receive the Spirit in John, there seems to be a feeling of peace and calm in the room. The disciples have been comforted and are ready to carry on the work to which Christ has called them. All is well.

But what are we to do with Thomas in this story? Today’s Gospel passage is the traditional text for the Sunday after Easter. It has long been nicknamed the story about “Doubting Thomas” which I think is a misnomer.

Poor Thomas has been relegated to history as the guy who didn’t believe the Good News, when in fact, we don’t know where Thomas was that night when Jesus appeared to the disciples. Maybe he was the one disciple who tried to rally the troops and encouraged them to join him in continuing Jesus’s message of radical love. Maybe he wasn’t there because he was out among the people that night telling them all he knew.

Regardless of Thomas’s location, he is absent for the first appearance of Jesus to the disciples that night. So he is doubtful of their experience. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas needs proof that the Jesus that his friends saw was not a phantom or a ghost. He needed proof that it was the resurrected Christ.

And so Jesus appears a week later to Thomas. Jesus grants the exact same peace to Thomas, the notorious doubter, that he grants to the disciples.

He invites Thomas to place his hands on Christ’s wounds, to feel for himself so that he might believe. Once Thomas is issued that invitation, he responds with the powerful statement, “My Lord and my God!” This is the point that John has been trying to make from the beginning of his Gospel. The same Word who was with God in the beginning *is* God now. The Christ that they had followed who now stands before them in resurrected form, *is* God. Thomas’s statement is not just one of the realization that it is Christ, but that Christ is God. He is the first person to make that connection in the Gospel. But first, he needed to feel for himself, to make sure.

Perhaps the point of Thomas’s story is not that he didn’t believe, but that in the midst of our fear and unbelief, we can remember that the Christ who sends his Spirit to us today is the same Christ who lived and walked on our earth, getting his feet dusty and dirty. He is the same Christ who consumed fish and bread along with the disciples and 5000 other followers. And he is the same Christ who understands fully what it means to live in this broken world. His wounds, which Thomas is invited to touch, are physical reminders that Christ understands our pain. Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple wrote that, “The wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity.”

It is with those credentials that the disciples receive Christ’s spirit which will equip them in the midst of their fears to share the love of God in Christ with the world.

And it is with those credentials that we receive Christ’s spirit today. Yes, the world is broken and hurting. Yes, there are many reasons to be fearful. But thanks be to God for our Christ who has also walked these roads of ours and who also knows what it means to suffer, but who also sends his spirit of peace to us, to a group of Christians in the Shenandoah Valley 2000 years later to calm and to comfort, to send and to stir us up.

What a breath of fresh air!

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insulin_shock_therapy> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-3)