

SERMON CCI John 20: 19- 23 Jesus Breathed the Spirit on Them

Breathing is important in this life. We often take breathing for granted until we can't breathe. We've seen the commercial with the grandfather and his grandson reading the story of the Three Little Pigs. When they get to the part where the wolf huffs and puffs to blow their house down, the boy points out that his grandfather huffs and puffs sometimes too. And we learn that the grandfather huffs and puffs because his lung disease makes it hard to get air and out of his lungs.

But you don't have to have lung disease to find it hard to breathe. Anyone who has ever had the wind knocked out of them, came close to drowning, or experienced a panic attack also knows what's it's like to not be able to breathe. When that first wonderful gasp of air inflates your lungs, it's like being reborn. The world looks different. Life has hope again.

Today's scripture reading takes place in the first days following Jesus' rising from the dead. The first part of the story that we will explore today, takes place Easter Sunday evening, the same day Mary Magdalene saw the risen Lord at the tomb and he sent her off to tell the excited news.

By that evening, Mary had done her work well because the news had spread around town and Jesus' disciples gathered to talk about what had happened. "Mary said she saw him with her own eyes!" "Anyone else see Jesus?" "Peter, you and John went to the tomb this morning, did you see Jesus?" Heads shake "No." Do they dare believe it? Then the fear starts. "What if Pilate sends the soldiers to arrest and kill us too? They know who we are." And the realization settles in that they could be in danger. Someone reaches over and sets the locks on the doors. And you can almost hear the air be sucked out of the room as the locks click shut. Fear was all there was left to breathe.

Ever feel that kind of fear? The kind of fear that sucks your breath away? The last time I felt that afraid was on my drive here from Dubuque, IA, 6 years ago. I left Dubuque on February 18 morning with our cat and enough belongings in the car to get me through until Rob arrived with our stuff 3 months later. About 90 minutes into the drive, a freak blizzard-like snow storm hit and very quickly it was impossible to see the road. Traffic slowed down to a snail's pace as we drove past trucks and cars off the sides of the highway wondering if we would be next. I didn't have snow tires or chains with me, and I didn't know whether to pull over and wait for help or keep driving. My decision could be the difference between life and death. Fear gripped me: What if I drove off the road? What if I was hit by a car

spun out of control? What if I froze wounded in the car? What if I died 90 minutes from home? I didn't dare call anyone because I had to keep my hands on the wheel. As I prayed outloud, crying in fear, I chose to keep driving. After a few minutes, I ended up behind a semi-truck and decided to follow it. But then the truck began to turn to the right, and I couldn't tell if it was going over the embankment, or turning onto an offramp I couldn't see. But I took a deep breath, and followed, and we ended up at a hotel right off the off-ramp where I could breathe again. 3 hours later, the highway was cleared and I was back on my way praising the Lord for being with me in my fear.

And into that fear-filled room in Jerusalem on Easter evening, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. He's alive! But wait a minute... what will Jesus say about how they all ran away and left him to die? What if he won't forgive them?" And as fear began to suck the air out of that room again, Jesus said the words they needed to hear. "Peace be with you!" Shalom a-lechem! Peace be with you!" Wholeness and forgiveness flooded that room like fresh air. Then they could come close and see the scars in his hands and side, and know it was the Lord just as Mary had said.

"Peace be to you." Such important words we need to hear when we have failed to live up to our best, failed to follow through, failed to walk by faith, fallen short of the glory of being created in God's image, failed to be the people we want to be, much less the people God calls us to be. "Peace. You're forgiven, the relationship is mended. Come close, don't be afraid, we're at peace." Such important words that Jesus said them twice: "Peace be to you." Like we offered to one another earlier this morning. Peace. Not at war, not at odds, at peace.

I think Jesus said it twice for more than just a feeling of forgiveness and relief, as good as those feelings are. Jesus knows that we don't make our best decisions based on fear; we make our best decisions when we're at peace. Decisions based on fear- fear of failure, fear of losing something, fear of looking bad, fear of you name it, tend to be short-sighted, decision to make us feel better in the moment, what makes life easier and safer. Decisions made when we are at peace can look beyond easier or safer to envision what is best, even though what is best may be harder, more expensive, or riskier.

So I believe Jesus spoke peace to them twice because Jesus had a job for them to do, and decisions would be needed to do that job. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." You see, he didn't want them to stay in that now-peace-filled room full of familiar people. He was sending them out into the world outside

that room to continue his ministry of healing, teaching, feeding, touching, baptizing, and growing people's faith. Even though they may be rejected or rebuffed. Just as Jesus had left the glory of heaven and come to be his Father's presence on earth, now he was sending his people out of that room into the world as his hands and feet, pointing the way to Jesus, bringing his healing and grace and love.

The disciples in that room had some decisions to make. They would soon need to decide who would take Judas Iscariot's place as an apostle, they will need to choose the first deacons to help serve the food line for the poor widows, they will need to decide how to organize themselves, where to meet together, who will do the teaching and preaching, the baptizing, how to handle conflict, where will the money come from for ministry and sending missionaries. Decisions. As much as they may have wanted to go back to what they had before, to sit and listen to Jesus teach about God, and watch him heal and feed people, and fight their battles, that time was past. Jesus will soon return to heaven and leave them on earth to carry on in his name. Jesus' last words to them before he leaves will be "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The question was, will they leave that room and go?

Decisions, decisions. Did any of those decisions sound familiar? Aren't they similar to what you've been talking and praying about for the past 5 months of discernment? Who's going to lead you? Where will you meet? What about the money? What kind of ministry is God calling you to now? And today an important moment of decision has arrived for you, when you will be deciding about the future direction of this congregation. Two different ways of being sent out into Issaquah in the name of Jesus will be before you for a decision. Two different ways of being Jesus' hands and feet. Two different ways of leaving the safety net of this room and going outside these walls with the good news of the gospel. Two different ways of partnering- one to partner with a new pastor to do the work God calls you to together, and the other to partner with another church of similar size and vision to do the work God calls you to together. Either way, Jesus is sending you out into Issaquah. The question is: Will you go?

Now you may be saying to yourself, but we don't have what it takes to be sent anywhere. We're small, and we're old, and we're tired, we don't have the

confidence to talk to people about faith, we don't have enough space, what if we try and fail?

Thank goodness, Jesus knows his followers well. He knew them well that first Easter evening, and he knows us well here this morning. Because Jesus didn't just give them a pep talk, "Come on, you can do it. You just have to believe in yourselves and work harder. Come on. Get moving. I'm counting on you." Like a football coach talking to the team at half time. No, into that room of disciples who were just like us in this room today, Jesus breathed the Spirit of God on them, because that's what they needed, he breathed the Spirit into them. Like God breathed the breath of life into Adam in the beginning. God's breath brought Adam to life and it's only by the Spirit that this congregation will have its breath of life for your future. Without the Spirit, you may be good people trying to do good things; but without the Spirit, they won't be God's things, just your own thing. You've been given the Spirit to guide you in the decisions ahead, to give you the courage to go out, and to give you the fresh air you will need for ministering in new times. So for a few moments right now, let's breathe, friends, breathe in deep, breathe in the Spirit of God's fresh air into your souls.

PRAYER

Holy Spirit of God, we need you today; we need you even more than we think we need you. We need your wisdom as decisions are made. Guide our thinking, give us the humility to let our minds be changed as you see fit, give us the mind of Christ together, so we can see the way you are leading and follow even though we cannot clearly see the road. Holy Spirit, give us courage for the days ahead, and breathe fresh air into our souls this day, that people in Issaquah may find new life in Christ.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us;

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.

Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.