

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Brett Gibson
Breathing In and Breathing Out
John 20:19-31
April 11, 2021

The Gospel lection brings us back this morning to that first day, that first day of the week. That's how John says it, too, "On the first day of the week." It's the third time he says that, in this chapter, the first day of the week. Like he wants us to hear something. I think it's more than just a euphemistic way of saying Sunday. This is the first day of the week. Two days before was the sixth day of the week, and we know from the opening words of John's prologue that in part, at least, what John is doing is writing some sort of new Genesis, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God...."

And in Genesis, we'll remember, God created on the first day and on the second day and on the third day... On the sixth day of the week, the day ends with the pinnacle of God's creative act, the creation endowed with the image of the Creator. On the sixth day, God creates the human. And in John's Gospel, on the sixth day, Pontius Pilate brings a battered Jesus in purple robes and a crown of thorns before the people and says, "Behold, the man." The sixth day.

And then the seventh day: rest, the quiet of a Sabbath in between. And now, the first day of the week. Three times, John says it, the first day of the week. We've broken through the seven-day creation cycle. Something new is here. The new creation has dawned.

We've already seen it earlier in chapter 20. Mary's walking outside the empty tomb and sees Jesus and thinks he is the gardener. Jesus in the new Garden, walking with Mary in the cool of the day. But now, still on the first day of that first week, but in the evening, we are with the disciples. Mary has told them, "I have seen the Lord." And they have responded by locking the doors of the house they are in; the reality of the new creation is hidden from them.

And John is explicit about the reason that they have locked the doors. They've closed themselves off to the world because of fear. Fear. One of the most basic human emotions, fear shuts all sorts of doors in our lives. It shuts the door to the other, to the one outside our tribe, to the one who is unknown to us. It shuts the door because the other is a threat, instead of a fellow human being.

Fear also shuts the doors even to ourselves, to our vocation, to the abundant life that God has called us to. It's fear that perpetuates lies, that we don't have what we need to have, that we don't do what we need to do, that others' opinions of us are the truth. Fear.

But Jesus walks right through the locked door of fear, he walks through and proclaims peace. "Peace be with you," he says, and then he shows his disciples his scars, which are the signs of another group of peoples' fear. Fear that led where fear will inevitably lead if unchecked, to

suffering, torment, death. But this is what Jesus does with fear. He does not return it. He does not lock it behind a door. He carries it, drags it behind him up a hill, out into the open, and absorbs it. Jesus stands before his disciples this Resurrection day and shows them the signs of his suffering. The resurrection has not erased these signs. Jesus shows them his hands and his sides and says again to them, a second time, "Peace be with you." Fear is not your way.

There are many ways, you understand. Many paths available to you in life. Most of those paths are rooted in some form of fear. The way of Caesar, assuming power and using whatever means necessary to take, is rooted in fear. The way of Herod, doing whatever it takes to preserve the status quo, is rooted in fear. The way of the Pharisees, a rigid, scriptural literalism that squelches the very life out of faithfulness to God, is rooted in fear.

But the way of Jesus will not be the way of fear. After Jesus breaks through their door of fear and proclaims peace and shows them what he has done with the Jewish establishment's fear in his own body and proclaims peace yet again, he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." In the same way the Father sent the Son, the Son sends the community of his followers.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity," our Psalm proclaims to us this morning.

Leslie Newbigin was a 20th century thinker and writer on the church and its mission in the world. He said, "It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what [Jesus] left behind him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life. What Jesus left behind him was a community." What Jesus leaves for the world is a community, a fellowship, a group of people sent in the same way Jesus was sent.

We remembered this week the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote a little punch of a book called *Life Together*, which opens with Psalm 133: *How very good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.* And he said in that book, "Christianity means community, through and in Jesus Christ."

The Jesus way is to be our way. It is not enough merely to confess certain truths. To follow Jesus is to walk in his way together. It would do us good, I think, to meditate on the way Jesus came. How did Jesus come? In what way? In what manner was Jesus sent?

Of course, there are plenty of ways to talk about the way Jesus was sent, but really, we only have to look at Jesus as he is saying this to his disciples. Jesus says, "as the Father sent me, so I am sending you" as he shows them. The scarred body of Jesus is the sign of the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is the way of suffering, of self-giving love, of the absorption of fear that breaks the cycles of violence in our world. His way is to be our way.

But the community that Jesus sends, he also equips. As powerful as the Word is in John's Gospel, a mere word of commissioning will never be enough. Jesus does not just tell his

disciples that they are sent. Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Again, a new Genesis is being written. Just as God breathed his Spirit, his breath, his life into the original man, Jesus now breathes his Spirit, his breath, his life into the community of the disciples.

In the ancient Jewish mind, the Spirit of God, the breath of God was the animating force for human beings. We are just a shell of dust until God puts his mouth on us and fills us with his breath. And now to this fearful new humanity, Jesus breathes a new, animating Spirit. A Spirit that interrupts our fear, that unlocks our doors, a Spirit that thrusts us out into a desperate world, to be for the world what Jesus was for the world. His breath is to be our breath.

The life of the Spirit is a consistent rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, of inhaling and exhaling. It works an awful lot like breathing oxygen, in fact. If we only breathe in, after a few short seconds, we will die. If we only breathe out, after a few short seconds, we will die. We need the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, to breathe in, to allow his spirit to fill us to animate us, to have space to receive from Jesus all that we need, and then to breathe it back out into the world.

The form this takes, Jesus says, is forgiving and retaining sin. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus says. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The calling is to liberate the imprisoned and to hold the guilty’s feet to the fire. To proclaim to the world the life-giving truth that the resurrection of Jesus proclaims, the life-giving truth that we all need to be reminded of: you are forgiven. And likewise, to remind individuals and power structures that there is such a thing called sin, that it is not forgotten, and that it has consequences. In other words, the breath of Jesus empowers us to do the unsettling work of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

This is what it is to belong to, what Bonhoeffer called, the “fellowship of the crucified”: to receive the peace of Christ, to join in the afflictions of Christ, to be sent in the way of Christ, to participate in the life of Christ.

All this occurs on that first Easter, that first day of the week. But today is the second Sunday of Easter, and thankfully in our story, one of the disciples wasn’t there that day. Thomas was not there that day. So the other disciples declare to Thomas the same thing Mary Magdalene had declared to them: “We have seen the Lord.” So Thomas says he wants to see Jesus, too; see him and touch his wounds. A week passes, and we come to today, the Sunday after that first Easter. This community of disciples are still together—Thomas is even with them this time.

They’ve been sent out, they’ve been blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, making them together the body of Christ on the earth, and where are they? Right back where they were last week. John says explicitly they were “again in the house” behind a closed door, and Jesus, once again, must come to his people, through the door, to give them what they need.

Fear doesn't magically disappear. "...Easter...turns the world upside down, but [we] live out [our] days in right-side up realities" (O'Day). The good news is that "Jesus comes anyway and comes repeatedly" (O'Day). May we all breathe in the breath of Jesus today so that we may breathe out the life of Jesus into the world as we live

Amen.

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