

Sunday, April 24, 2022

Let us pray:

Holy God, source of all life and love, in raising your son Jesus, you surprised everyone except Jesus. Breathe your life into us, here and now, that we too may know your constant love, wherever we are.

Amen.

Grace to you, and PEACE to you, from God, from Jesus, who repeatedly said to his disciples, "Peace be with you."

In central Wyoming, on the outside wall of a convenience store in which customers serve themselves soft ice cream, a large sign reads, "Welcome to Wyoming -- It will blow you away!"

Last Wednesday I commiserated with the woman inside that store, about living with wind. We get it.

Our text says Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." You might remember that spirit, breath and wind are all possible accurate translations of a Greek word used so many times in the New Testament.

For the past couple of years, many of us have been especially aware of sharing breath with others. Of course, airborne illnesses are not new. But some are more deadly than others. We need fresh air, new air that the wind distributes.

I suspect we all can use some new Jesus breath, some new Holy Spirit, to awaken our entire beings, breathing in all that God gives.

We meet doubting Thomas each year on the second Sunday of the Easter season. He is all of us.

Thomas missed Jesus' first appearance to the core group of disciples after his resurrection and when the others told him they had seen Jesus alive, his response was pretty much "Yeah, right."

The following week, when Thomas saw Jesus with his own eyes, he was blown away. (But not like Wyoming and Montana.) Thomas's response was one of the world's shortest creeds: My Lord and my God!

Thomas was filled with a new wind, a new spirit, a new understanding.

It occurs to me that in our culture, Thomas's words still accompany surprises, both good and bad. OH my lord! and OMG! we cry. What if we actually were to call on God this way -- utterly astonished, as Thomas was?

Maybe having doubts can actually bring new life into our faith, changing us, changing the way we interact with the world. Maybe doubts help us to be honest with God and ourselves -- which is a very good place to be.

John's gospel, more than the others, points to the tangible, fully physical aspects of Jesus's human experience. Following Jesus's resurrection, his hands and feet and side bore the scars of his brutal death.

"Put your finger here," he told Thomas. He met Thomas exactly where he was, knowing Thomas's need for tangible evidence.

Now, Jesus, is in a form that transcends time and space, so he can be with each of us exactly where we are, knowing what WE need.

That's hard to believe. It might be impossible to believe. We are reminded all too often that if something seems too good to be true, it very likely is not true.

John wrote that Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Yeah, right?

Martin Luther, in his Explanation of the Small Catechism, wrote, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in the Lord Jesus, or come to Him. But I am called by the Holy Spirit..." -- called by the wind, the breath of God.

He breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit."
—John 20:22

As we continue to rest in the promise of the Easter story this week, we are invited to join in God's life-giving breath of peace. The poem "Blessing of Breathing," by Jan Richardson, speaks into times of stress and grief, inviting us all to breathe through pain into freedom. This is from Jan Richardson's book, The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief.

Richardson wrote:

You can almost feel it resonating throughout Christendom: a deep, collective breath being taken. In the wake of the intensity of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter—intensity borne of the starkness of this stretch of the liturgical year as well as its immense, nearly overwhelming richness—we need a pause, a shared regathering of ourselves as we begin to absorb what it means that Christ is risen, that death has not had the final word.

Breath is precisely what Jesus comes to give his disciples, his friends who followed him to the end and hardly know what to do now, reeling as they are from all that has occurred and struggling to discern what happens next.

He breathed on them, John tells us in his gospel. More than any words could have done, this breath comes as gift, as grace: Christ's own breath that bears to them the Spirit that will enable them to keep living, to keep breathing, to proclaim the astonishing news of the risen Christ, and to be his body in this world.

Here on this side of Easter Sunday, what deep breath do you need to take? How will you open yourself to the risen Christ who comes to breathe the Spirit into you?

(I invite you to breathe fully now, with me)

Blessing of Breathing

by Jan Richardson

That the first breath will come without fear.

That the second breath will come without pain.

The third breath: that it will come without despair.

And the fourth, without anxiety.

That the fifth breath will come with no bitterness.

That the sixth breath will come for joy.

Breath seven: that it will come for love.

May the eighth breath come for freedom.

And the ninth, for delight.

When the tenth breath comes,
may it be for us to breathe together,
and the next, and the next,

until our breathing is as one,
until our breathing is no more.

Peace be with you.

Amen. May it be so.