



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“The Breath of God”
Scripture – John 20:19-31
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, April 23, 2017

My yoga instructor is fond of saying: “If you do nothing else but sit here and breathe for an hour, you’ll get something out of this class.” She mentions this every week as our cohort of amateur yogis gathers on Wednesday evenings, all of us seeking respite and renewal in this ancient practice. As we get situated on our mats, Mary draws our attention to the breath: “Inhale through your nose,” she says. “And exhale through your mouth. Place a hand on your belly, and notice how deeply you are breathing. Lengthen your spine and feel your lungs filling with air. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.”

‘Focus on your breath’ becomes Mary’s mantra as she leads our class through a sequence of stretches and balancing poses and sun salutations: Focus on your breath, and you’ll sink deeper into that stretch. Focus on your breath, and you’ll relax into the pose. Breathe in; breathe out. Breathe in; breathe out.

As we breathe our way through our yoga practice, I find that I become more and more centered. With each breath out, the tension of the day begins to dissipate. And with each breath in, energy returns to weary arms and legs. And bit by bit, I find myself feeling restored and renewed, and even a little more alive. The secret to yoga is in the breath.

We all know how important breathing is — at least we know that up here [*in our minds*]. But — unless you’re a singer or a runner or a physician — the breath is something we rarely consider ... until the breath of life is threatened or lost. We notice it suddenly when a near run-in with a tractor trailer sucks the breath right out of us, or when panic leaves us panting for air. We notice it when we witness a loved one breathe her last, or when the pangs of loss threaten to suffocate us. In these moments of fear or grief, we are left gasping for air, for that which can restore us to life. For, as yoga reminds us, breath has the power to restore and renew ... even to make us feel more alive.

Perhaps this is why the Risen Lord greets his disciples with such an unconventional gesture; only moments after appearing to his friends, he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. It is his first act after that moment of recognition, when Jesus’ followers realize that it is the crucified Christ standing before them — bearing the wounds of crucifixion, but very much alive.

Until this joy-filled reunion, this community has been defined by death. We know the story, for we have just remembered it, right alongside those first disciples ... Christ’s followers have suffered the loss of their teacher and friend. They stood by — some of them at the foot of the cross — as Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit, then they watched helplessly as Joseph of Arimathea took down the Messiah’s mangled body and placed him in

a garden tomb. As the stone was heaved into place, it must have seemed to those first disciples that hope had been sealed in the grave with the breathless body of their Lord.

As far as we can tell from the text, this community is still living in a Good Friday world. Scripture tells us that they have retreated to the house where they'd previously met, and locked the doors for fear of the authorities. As darkness descends on the first day of the week, it is clear the news of Christ's resurrection has not lifted these disciples from despair:

Even though they have heard the proclamation of Mary, who joyfully announced: I have seen the Lord! ... Even though they certainly have heard the testimonies of Peter and the beloved disciple, who — that very morning — stood in the empty tomb and beheld the cast off grave clothes ... Even though Jesus told his disciples that he would see them again, and that their pain would turn into joy, this group of fearful followers huddles in a locked room as if death has won the day! Just like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, these disciples cannot grasp the promise of eternal life *even* when the evidence points to resurrection hope. Instead, as the sun sets on that first Easter, they cower in the darkness of disbelief and death (which — for John — are practically one in the same).

This scene stands in stark contrast to the scene of resurrection, where Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple glimpsed God's glory in an empty garden grave. While Jesus is risen and on the loose, breathing in new life, these disciples are imprisoned in a tomb of their own making, breathing in the stagnant air of a room thick with fear. This fear has choked out hope and faith, making them blind to signs of new life.

But — just as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead — the One who is the Resurrection and the Life is intent on calling these disciples out of the tomb ...

So, bearing the marks of death but bursting with resurrected life, the living Lord comes to this room-full of fearful followers. "Peace be with you," Christ says. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then comes that unconventional greeting, when Jesus breathes upon this community mired in death.

As surprising as this act must have been to those first disciples, it is an image we have seen before in the witness of Scripture.¹

We see this creative act in Genesis, when God reaches into untouched soil and molds the first human being from the dust of the earth. Do you recall what happens next? The Creator leans close to the creature, and breathes into Adam's nostrils the breath of life.

And we see this in Ezekiel, when God sets the prophet down in a valley full of bones ... full of *dry* bones. At the Lord's command Ezekiel prophesies, saying to the Spirit: "Come from the four winds and breathe upon these slain!" And the breath of God comes and enters into these lifeless bones, until they live.

And, now, we see this in the Gospel of John, as the resurrected One breathes the breath of God upon these Good Friday people that they too might live.

It is the same creative act. The *exact* same creative act. An act that is consistent across time and testament, signaled by the *same* Greek verb, as if the Spirit was leaving a trail of bread crumbs to guide us from the Garden of Eden to the empty Garden Tomb ... and now to a room-full of disciples, whom Christ will send out to claim and *proclaim* life abundant.

¹ Sermon Brainwave Podcast #537 – Second Sunday of Easter, www.workingpreacher.org

Here in this locked house, the risen Lord participates in God's creative work — work that began at the dawn of time and that continues wherever the breath of God stirs us to life. By breathing the Holy Spirit upon this listless community, Jesus invites the disciples to share in his resurrection and calls them from the tomb into abundant life.

For John *this* is the promise of the resurrection: Not only that we can trust in the promise of life everlasting; but that we can claim life abundant in this world — in the kingdom God is breathing into being even now. In the kingdom we can glimpse with the eyes of faith.

This is the promise of the resurrection: That God's creative work is never done, for — wherever the Spirit of God blows — resurrected life is possible. As our sacred story attests, the breath of God has power to awaken life, even in the most dire of circumstances: From lifeless clay and dry bones; from a body that has been tortured and nailed to a cross, and bodies that cower in tombs of their own making; from despairing peoples who have lost all hope, and communities where fear threatens to choke out faith.

There is life in this breath. And wherever the Spirit moves, the Lord is at work: inviting us to share in Christ's resurrection and calling us from tombs that bind us to despair and inertia, into a life of deep faith and abiding hope, of healing and reconciliation, of joyful witness and committed service. In short — into God's abundant life.

Professor Paul Galbreath, who teaches Worship at Union Seminary in Richmond, tells the story of a community of faith that — like those first disciples — was trapped by death.² Circumstances beyond their control had caused such decline that this congregation could no longer imagine its future. But God was not finished with these dry bones just yet.

During Holy Week one year, the Spirit of God used an unconventional tool to breathe new life into this lifeless body: a leaky roof in the sanctuary. Having lost their gathering place, the minister and elders of this church got creative. For Good Friday they decided to walk through the neighborhood and read from the Passion story at places where violence had erupted during the past year.

Under darkened skies a small group met outside that old and leaky sanctuary, then slowly made their way down the street to the first scene of violence. In late December a young boy had been killed in a drive-by shooting while playing in his living room. The group approached, singing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?," then stopped to read an account of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. When they had finished the reading, the group moved to the next stop. In front of a small grocery store, they gathered at the place where an older woman had been robbed. Quietly the church members sang again, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Tears filled their eyes as the Gospel was read. For two hours on that Good Friday afternoon, they continued this pattern throughout the neighborhood.

When this community gathered two days later to welcome the Risen Christ, the members reflected on that Good Friday service. One by one, they shared how their journey through the neighborhood had impacted them. Finally the pastor spoke: "We cannot stay inside the walls of this church any longer. Today we are committing ourselves to working for justice in this community. May the Spirit of God breathe new life into us as we go forth. Christ is risen indeed!"

In the months that followed, it was clear that the Spirit of God was at work in that community. Day after day, members gathered to walk around the streets of their neighborhood. On Fridays, they began serving a meal at the church for those who were homeless. On Mondays, they worked in the community garden, planting, watering,

² Paul Galbreath, *Leading Through the Water* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2011), 30-32.

and weeding. On Wednesday afternoons, they volunteered as tutors in the elementary school. And every Saturday morning, they picked up trash in the schoolyard down the street. Starting that season of Easter, this congregation on the verge of death heeded God's call to share in Christ's resurrection. And — in the process — they embraced abundant life.

God is still at work ... In Good Friday enclaves that have shuttered the world, and the Spirit. And in bodies that feel like dry bones or lifeless clay. In communities that can no longer glimpse God's creative work. And in lives entombed by hopelessness. The Spirit still blows: creating and re-creating; restoring and renewing; calling us to share in Christ's resurrection.

So, sisters and brothers — Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on the breath. And trust that it is the breath of God that lives in you — summoning you to faith, enlivening your witness, and inviting you into abundant life.