

The Breath of Christ©

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John 20:19-31

Who, in this room, likes to breathe? Silly question, isn't it? Aren't we amazing creatures? Aren't all living beings pretty amazing? Without breath we would just be an object, not a living being.

But who among us thinks about breathing? All our lives, from the time we are born, we breath – in and out and in and out. Unless we have some cause to focus on our breathing, we kind of take it for granted, don't we? Most of the time?

We might put our thoughts on breathing at certain times – like when we're singing. I wish I were better at controlling my breath so I could hold out the notes better. I've always had trouble with that.

In yoga we're always being told to focus on our breath. Taking deep breaths in and out. When we swim it's important to know how to breath right.

But, if we aren't really paying attention to it, we just breathe and take it for granted, right? We go to sleep at night and breathe without even trying. We don't think about it too much until breathing becomes a struggle. Then, it is almost all we think about.

I think of my dad, who, for so many years had to use oxygen 24/7. He had permanent lines on his face where the oxygen tubes went. It was a struggle just to get up from his chair and walk a few steps to the kitchen or bathroom. Going out any place meant carrying an oxygen can and that was exhausting.

My dad took breathing for granted for many years. Until he didn't anymore. And finally, he took his last breath and when that was gone, he was gone too.

Why do our bodies breathe? I think of Genesis 2:7 where God creates the first man – Adam. "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

The breath of God breathed into the first human and we've been breathing ever since. When God breathes on us, we come alive.

Remember the Valley of the Dry Bones, where God says: ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.' (Ezekiel 37:5-6)

The breath of God gives life and give us his presence.

Now, John tells us that on Easter evening, the disciples were gathered in a room with the door locked because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, who were the ones responsible for having Jesus killed. In John, although it is translated as disciples, he most likely is talking about

that little faithful group of Jesus followers – including the 11 disciples, but also other men and women ... although Thomas seems to be missing on this night.

Suddenly, Jesus is there in the room with them. He didn't knock or open the door. He just appeared. Surely, they were confused and afraid. Was this a ghost? He greeted them with the usual greeting – 'Shalom.' Or, 'Peace be with you.'

It was a normal way to greet each other in that day. But then he does it again. Only this time, he says it after he shows them his wounds from being crucified. And they were elated when they realized it truly was the Lord. Risen from the dead. Alive! Just as he had said.

It was a fulfillment of the promise he gave them back in chapter 16 when he said: ²²'So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.' (John 16:22)

So, when he says again "Peace be with you," now it takes on a new meaning, doesn't it? Surely they will remember how he said: ²⁷'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.' (John 14:27)

Now, because Jesus stands before them – alive – they no longer have to be afraid of anyone. Their joy will not be snatched away from them. Yes, they will still face persecution and pain and suffering but they will have the peace of Christ in them and that makes all the difference in the world.

Except they still needed something else. Jesus told them that just as the Father had sent him into the world for a purpose – now he is sending them to continue that purpose, that work.

And then he does this amazing thing, just as God did at the beginning of creation, with the first human – he breathed on them. Breathed the breath of Christ into them and they became a *new* creation! I love the words in the assurance of forgiveness that says, 'all who are in Christ are a new creation. The old life is gone and the new life has begun.' (2 Corinthians 5:17)

It's kind of a creation story all over again. Creation, Part Two. Why are they a new creation? What happens that changes the faith community?

It's the Paraclete, which is Greek for Holy Spirit. Jesus breathes his spirit into those disciples and they suddenly become new. They are empowered; they are encouraged and not afraid; they are given what they need to be sent into the world to continue the work of Christ.

Think about flying a kite. How long has it been since you did that? I almost forgot about kites and how wonderful they are. Fred and I used to take the kids out on Easter afternoon to fly kites out at the farm where I grew up. There are lots of wide open spaces there on the prairie. Great places for flying a kite.

Sometimes we would go to the park and fly them there. It's so fun to see them finally, usually after several attempts, soaring up into the sky, getting higher and higher, sometimes disappearing into the haze in the sky.

So, I got to thinking about kites and how important it is for a kite to have a tail. Without a tail – and it has to be just the right size and weight – the kite will be out of control. It will dip and spin and have no stability against the wind. The wind can just destroy that kite, or cause it to come spinning and crashing to the ground.

But with the right tail, that kite can soar higher and higher, using the wind to lift it instead of beat it up. And if the kite gets so high you can't see it, how do you know it's still there, attached to the string?

You feel the tug, don't you? There is a resistance as you pull on the string.

So, this is a bit like the Holy Spirit. Like the tail of that kite, the Spirit keeps us stable, keeps us from spinning out of control, helps us to fly, to go with the wind (or the storms and trials in life), helps us to not allow the wind to beat us down.

We can't see the Holy Spirit, so how do we know he is there? Like the kite tugging on the string, we feel him tugging on our hearts, right? We experience the resistance when we go the opposite way; we feel convicted when we do something against God's will; we know the tug to move toward God, to help someone in need, to pray, to study the Scriptures. And when we do read the Bible, it is the Holy Spirit that shows us the truths that are there.

Of course, the next part of this passage is when Thomas is present and Jesus appears to him. When the others had told Thomas about Jesus being alive, being there with them, he just could not believe it until he saw for himself.

We focus so much on Thomas' doubt, but this is more about Jesus than it is Thomas. It's about Jesus graciously offering himself so that Thomas has what he needs to believe – to have faith.

But then Jesus says, 'you believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who will believe without seeing.' That would be us, right?

Why do you think you believe in Jesus today? Have you seen him? Have you touched the holes in his hands and side? Have you heard his voice? Is that why you believe?

The work of the Holy Spirit is to give us what we need to believe without seeing. To read the truth in the Scriptures and understand and believe.

In John, we have resurrection and Pentecost on the same day – Easter evening. This is the commissioning of the church. Jesus' very breath breathes on the disciples and they are sent out with all the power and courage and gifts they need to continue the work of Christ in the world.

And just what is that work? To reveal God through his Son Jesus so that the world will believe in him and be saved. To love one another as Christ has loved us. In doing so, we are revealing God through Jesus.

And we cannot do it without the breath of Christ; without the power of the Holy Spirit in us – the gift that is given to every believer.

Friends, believe this – you have the Holy Spirit – the breath of Christ living in you. And because you do, you have all the gifts and power you need to soar high like a kite – to be in control against whatever winds are blowing. For it is not by your own power but by the power of the Spirit of Christ.

You can be sure that you have the peace of Christ living in you. Not peace as the world gives but Christ's peace so that you need not be afraid.

You are sent. We, the church, are sent by Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into the world and tell others, show others the love of God, revealed through his Son – who gave his life so that the world would have new life.

Breathe in the breath of Christ. And give thanks.

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