



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter St. John 20:10-23

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In the Easter acclamation we announce, “He is risen!” That’s good news, but what does it mean for us? What’s the application? What does it have to do with who we are as Christians? How does it change things for us? What do we do with it? Our Gospel today has something to say about all this in that odd scene where Jesus breathed on his friends. Look again at John 20:22-23:

[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

What does that mean? Jesus breathes out the Holy Spirit on his friends—which is kind of an odd thing in itself—and he tells them that if they forgive sins those sins are forgiven and that if they withhold forgiveness, forgiveness is withheld. Did he actually? Or was it a symbolic act? A sacramental act? What do we do with this?

Some Christians see Jesus imparting a gift of the Spirit specifically to the apostles—a gift that would empower them literally to forgive sins and to pass that gift on to the bishops and the priests who would succeed them. This was one of the ideas that the Reformers objected to in the 16th Century and our liturgy reflects it. The Church’s ministers do *not* give forgiveness. They *announce* the forgiveness of sins that *God* offers through Jesus to those who are

repentant and believe. The Church’s ministers are ministers of *grace*—*God’s* grace. And when I say that about the Church’s ministers, that means all of us, not just the clergy. Brothers and Sisters, grace belongs to God. We do not control it. Forgiveness does not depend on the willingness of a priest to “give” it.

But if this isn’t Jesus giving special powers to his apostles and their successors, what *is* this about? To understand that, we need to take a step back in the story. In verse 19 John says that the disciples were hiding. They gathered together, locked the doors, and barred the windows. I expect they were being very quiet lest anyone hear them. They hoped that if anyone passed by it would look like no one was home. They hoped that if the authorities came knocking, they’d quickly move on in their search. Jesus’ friends had been hiding since Friday, since he was crucified. And they were hiding because, when the Romans crucified a revolutionary or someone who claimed to be the Messiah, they didn’t typically leave it at the leader of the movement. They usually crucified the other leaders and close followers of whomever they had convicted of treason. In the great revolt that would take place a generation later, the Romans didn’t just crucify a handful of leaders. They crucified everyone. They couldn’t make crosses fast enough and ran out. So Jesus had been nailed to a cross and his friends thought they were likely to be next. It’s not hard to imagine how afraid they were.

John also tells us that it was the first day of the week. It was Sunday. Mary had gone to the tomb just that morning and found it empty. She had gone to tell the others. As we read last Sunday, Peter and John went to see the empty tomb for themselves. But that didn’t mean they weren’t still afraid. The tomb was empty. Mary and John insisted Jesus had been raised from the dead. The others were sceptical. This wasn’t how resurrection was supposed to happen. It was supposed to be

everyone all at once, not just one person, even if he was the Messiah. Imagine them arguing in that shut-up dark house. Voices started to rise. And then a big “Shhhh!” from one of them. “Whatever happened to Jesus happened to Jesus, but the Romans or Herod’s soldiers are probably out there right now combing the city and looking for us! John thinks Jesus rose from the dead, but I’m not ready to test that theory myself! Keep your voices down!”

But then John says that Jesus suddenly appeared in the room. The doors were locked, but somehow Jesus got inside and to these men who were already afraid and who were now probably *really* afraid of this man who suddenly appeared in their midst, Jesus says the one thing they most needed to hear: “Peace be with you!” There’s something very practical in that. But it’s full of kingdom reality too. Jesus came to bring peace—to his friends and to the whole world—and so it’s natural that the very first thing he says to his friends as they sit there cowering in fear and thinking that all the hopes they had put in Jesus had come crashing down on Friday—it’s natural that the first thing he would say to them is “Peace be with you”. Don’t be afraid. That was the first Easter message. But, also, don’t lose hope. Jesus is saying in those few words, “I’m alive. Your hopes weren’t misplaced. When they killed me they declared that I’m not the Messiah, not the King, but God has overturned their verdict and here I am. Peace be with you. I really am the Messiah and I really am making all things new.”

Remember what Jesus was all about. The Messiah was to set God’s world to rights. Because it was wrong—because of our rebellion and idolatry—God and human beings had been separated. In his graciousness, the Lord had established the temple as a place where heaven and earth overlapped and human beings could enter his presence—only, of course, after having purified themselves and

offered sacrifices for their sins. And remember that Jesus had hinted that God was about to do something new and much bigger. Jesus declared that the temple's days were over. He would tear it down and in three days build a new one. Think about that again. The temple was the place of God's presence. It was the place where humans could meet God. And it was the place where humans could find forgiveness of sins. It was the greatest place on earth. It was a beacon of light in a dark world. And Jesus was going to tear it down and build something new and better.

And now, on the third day after his crucifixion, the risen Jesus—vindicated by God and declared to truly be the Messiah, to truly be the King—appears to his disciples. John says they spent some time marvelling as he showed them the wounds in his hands and in his side. There was no doubting that it was him. John says they were glad—which is, no doubt, an understatement. And then Jesus says to them in verse 21:

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

“Peace be with you,” again. This time there's more to it than just, “Don't be afraid.” This is a commissioning. Jesus came to bring peace and now he's giving his friends a mission to carry his peace to the world. There's to be no more hiding. “As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you.” Jesus had sent them out to the towns and villages of Galilee to prepare the way for him. Now he's sending them out again, but this is an even bigger mission. But they need more than reassuring words from Jesus. They need to be equipped.

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Brothers and Sisters, when Jesus rose from the grave he set the power of God's new creation in motion and here, Jesus breathes on them—yet another one of his powerful visual object lessons he was so fond of—to say that because of his resurrection, new creation has now been imparted to them. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for wind and breath and spirit are all the same. As God breathed life into Adam, now Jesus, the second Adam, breathes new life into the disciples. I suspect C. S. Lewis had this scene in mind when, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, he wrote about the great lion, Aslan, breathing life back into the people the White Witch had turned to stone. Aslan, the Christ-figure of Narnia, breathed on these dead stone statues and, like flame licking its way across paper, their colour returned and in moments they were moving again—and soon after they were running through the witch's palace looking for others so that Aslan could breathe on them and restore them to life. That's something of the visual Jesus offers here. He breathes on the disciples, recalling God's breathing on Adam, as if to say, “Because of my resurrection, you have received God's Holy Spirit. Because of my resurrection, the life of God that Adam rejected has been given back to you. Now go out to find others, proclaim the good news about me, so that they can share in this gift of life.

People often think that the purpose of the Holy Spirit is to give us some kind of spiritual experience or to make us holy. The Spirit certainly can and does do those things, but first and foremost, Jesus has given us the Spirit to equip and to empower us to go into the world in the same way that the Father sent Jesus into the world. Jesus gives us the Spirit—he breathes the very life of God into us—and makes us the new temple, the new place where God meets human beings. Think on that this week. We Christians are the place where earth

and heaven meet, because God's spirit indwells us. We, the Church, are his temple. And as he gave Adam the task of expanding the garden of Eden, he gives his disciples the task of expanding the temple—of taking it to the world and of inviting the world to become a part of it.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, as you breathed your Spirit into your friends that first Easter Sunday you have fill us with your Spirit in our baptism. You have made us whole and you have made us holy. Now send us out into the world, equipped and empowered by your Spirit, that we might proclaim the good news to others, that they might be made whole and holy by your death for sins and your rising to give life. Amen.