



He Breathed on Them

St. John 20:10-23

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Our Gospel lesson this morning is a powerful lesson about our mission as Jesus' people in light of his resurrection from the dead. And that powerful message centres on that cryptic scene and those cryptic words in John 20:22-23. St. John writes,

[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. What do we do with that?

Some Christians see Jesus imparting a gift of the Spirit specifically to the apostles—a gift that would empower them 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 fought strongly against 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. We are ministers of grace—and that means all of us, not just the clergy—but 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 gathered together in someone's house. The doors were locked, the windows were tightly shut. 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, when Jesus 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. Jesus had been nailed to a cross and his friends thought they might be next. So you can 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 at the Easter Vigil, Matthew tells us that Peter and John went to see the empty tomb for themselves. But that didn't mean they weren't still afraid. Mary had seen Jesus alive, but all they'd seen was the empty tomb and they apparently weren't inclined to give much credit to Mary's story. Okay, the tomb was empty. Mary thought she'd seen Jesus alive again. But that didn't mean the Romans or Herod's guards weren't still out there looking for them and ready to drag them off to die on crosses too.

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. You're hopes weren't misplaced. When they killed me they declared that I'm not the Messiah, not the King, but God had overturned their verdict and here I am. Peace be with you. I'm 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 human could find forgiveness of sins. 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 marveling 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. “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. As we go on, keep the temple in the back of your mind. Again, it was the place where human beings and God came together. It was the place of forgiveness. So Jesus sends them out to carry on his mission and he now equips them:

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, as he breathes on them, the new creation take root in 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 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 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 what Jesus does here. He breathes the Holy Spirit into his friends and then

sends them out to find others so that they can share 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 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. 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.

Jesus died on Good Friday. He rose on Easter. He accomplished the forgiveness of sins. He began the process of making all things new. But how does what he did two thousand years ago in that time and place, how does it impact the rest of the world? How does it come to peoples and cultures with no thought for God’s kingdom? How does it speak to people halfway around the world who had no knowledge of God’s Messiah and had never even thought of putting their hope in his coming? How does it speak to people two thousand years after it happened.

Back in John 4, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that “salvation is from the Jews.” Salvation is *from* Israel, *for* the whole world. The story of God and Israel reached its climax in Jesus. He embodied Israel himself and died for Israel’s sins. But now these Jewish disciples, empowered by Jesus himself, are called to take this message of God’s faithfulness out to the nations and anyone who believes, anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is Lord, can take part in this salvation and, in finding new life in Jesus, can become part of this new Israel, this new temple, this new creation.

Notice that John tells us that this was the first day of the week. His point is that in Jesus, God’s work of re-creation has begun. Jesus has set it in motion. And the task of his disciples is to take what Jesus has begun and apply it to the world around them—to start living and announcing the reality of the kingdom—to start expanding it and spreading it around.

Jesus’ breathing on his disciples speaks of new creation in another way too. Think back again to Genesis. We’re told there that God would come to Adam and Eve, to fellowship with them in the time of the evening breeze. After they sinned, we’re told that when God came looking for them he came not as a gentle breeze, but as a whirlwind. But here now on that first Easter, the gentle breath of Jesus flows over and around his disciples. Jesus had undone Adam’s fall and God is with man once again. As God had breathed life into Adam, the second Adam now breathes life into his friends.

Jesus had twice promised peace. I expect he promised it many more times than that, but John records two instances in chapters 14 and 16. And now Jesus announces that peace to them. It really has finally come. And he sends them out to proclaim it. This is what those words about forgiving sins and not forgiving sins are all about. Jesus is sending them out to proclaim the good news. Jesus who was crucified is risen. He is Lord and he is making all things new, he’s restoring sinful human beings to their Creator. The good news is a message of forgiveness and life for all who will believe and give their allegiance to Jesus. But, Jesus says, they are also to retain sin—which is probably a better translation than to withhold forgiveness. Jesus is commissioning them not only to announce forgiveness, but to warn the world that the wages of sin truly is death and separation from God. Jesus highlights

something we need badly to hear today: You can't proclaim the good news without also announcing the bad news. Sin has consequences. Serious consequences. Which is why the good news is such *good* news. We are dead in our sins—that's the bad news and the warning—but if we will repent and follow Jesus, the good news is that we have a share in the life of God and of the age to come.

I think Mary that first Easter morning gives us a very down-to-earth example of the kingdom and of new life and of the good news about Jesus. Not only that, but we see how the good news meets us where we are and brings forgiveness, life, and hope. Mary's there in the eight verses between last Sunday's Gospel and this Sunday's. She went to the tomb that morning in tears. She was a wreck. Her friend and master was dead. And then she got there to find his body gone. Now she's devastated. Think to one of those times when you were absolutely crushed by something and grieving your heart out. You thought it couldn't get any worse and then it got worse. The angel asked her why she was crying and she sobbed out, "They've taken my lord away."

Brothers and Sisters, as we proclaim the good news about Jesus we come face to face with the pain and the grief and the tears of real people. Like Mary they are broken and devastated. If we ask why they're crying they may tell us, "They have taken away...my husband, my wife, my child. They have taken away...my hope, my life, my dignity. Mary embodies the grief and the pain of a world set wrong by sin.

And that's when Mary turned around and someone was there. Who was he? Mary guessed that he was the gardener. She was wrong and right at the same time. There was Jesus, risen from the dead and the world's true Lord. You would think he had better things to do, but there he was

gardening. John doesn't say specifically what he was doing, but whatever it was led Mary to think he was the gardener. But it makes perfect sense. Jesus knew what he was doing. New Creation broke into the world that morning. Pilate had declared, "Behold, the man!" And here he is, the new Adam and here's the new Adam, doing the task that Adam had rejected: taking care of the garden. I like to think that when Mary saw him, Jesus was hard at work ripping a thornbush or brambles from the ground so that a fruit tree or flowers could be planted.

But Mary didn't recognize him. The same was true for some of us the first time we saw Jesus and the same thing is true for so many of the people we will bring to him. We can hear the back and forth between Jesus and Mary as she cried and poured out her heart to this man she thought was a stranger, bringing her problems to him. And then he says her name. She didn't know him, but he knew her and that's true of all of us. It's true of everyone. And when he says our names he says so much. He greets us. He rebukes us for our unbelief. He consoles us in our pain and grief. He invites us to himself. And suddenly, like Mary, we know him. He was different and the same all at once. He's alive with a new kind of life the likes of which we have never seen before. I suspect the only people who would have recognized it were Adam and Eve, because they were the only ones who had ever known that life. But Jesus now offers it to us. He makes us clean, he forgives our sins, and he wipes away the tears, not just of our own guilt, but all the pain caused by the sins of others.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus welcomes us into his new creation, into the garden restored, into the temple. It's a building still under construction. We may see ourselves as broken or worthless, but Jesus knows our pain. He was the stone that the builders

rejected. But he has become the cornerstone of God's new temple. And he knows just the place for each of us. He breathes God's spirit into us, he wipes away our tears, he washes away our sins, he restores us to the life of God, he makes us whole and he makes us holy—and he gives us a holy task. Because his temple will not be complete until each stone has been brought, until, as God planned for Eden in the beginning, the garden, the place of his presence has filled the earth. As God spoke through the prophet Habakkuk, one day the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Friends, Jesus now sends us into the world to proclaim the good news—to announce that in him God's King has come, that he will judge sin and set the world to rights, but that he also offers forgiveness and the life of his new world to all who will come to him as Lord and Saviour.

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.