



BREATHING

April 19, 2009; Second Sunday of Easter

Mark 13:1-8

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Our second scripture lesson comes from the book of John. This story picks up after Easter when in John, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus in the garden. When reading and hearing scripture from John there are sometimes references to "the Jews." It's important to know that John was referring to some Jews, not all Jews, and that at the time this was written there were tensions between those John wrote for and the Jews they knew.

And now a reading from John 20:19-23

John 20:19-23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

My doctor tells me that I breathe from my chest. Apparently this is not good. I am instead to breath from my gut. She says that my body works too hard to haul in air. I had no idea that any of this mattered.

Breathing is important.

Jesus was dead. And then here he is, breathing. Big things happen when God breathes.

Did Jesus breathe from his chest, from deep down in his guts? I don't know, but he breathed. He breathed in, and he breathed out. He was alive.

Last month I went to New Orleans with a group of Central members and friends. We were there on a mission trip. We stayed in a church that was converted into dorms. There were nine women from Central in one room. The conversations were fun and lively. All had good attitudes and worked hard to be accommodating.

The big challenge came about when we went to sleep. You see, there was some snoring. After the first restless night, one woman in our group remembered a recent NPR story. NPR reported that if one placed a 'Breathe Right' strip on his or her nose it would limit snoring. So off we went to the nearby Winn Dixie to find 'Breathe Right' strips. They are small adhesive strips that one places over the bridge of the nose. The idea is to open up the air passage allowing for better breathing, thus less snoring. Did they work? Kind of. Is there really a right way to breathe?

Sometimes breathing can be hard.

In 2000 the movie *Cast Away* was released. In it Tom Hanks plays Chuck Noland, a man who is the only survivor of a plane crash over the ocean. He finds himself on an island and manages to survive. Eventually he builds a raft with a sail and is able to leave the island. There is little dialogue in most of the movie. Then at the end, Chuck is back home talking to a friend. He says, "I had power over nothing. And that's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew, somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow. I had to keep breathing. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing. And now, here I am. I'm back. In Memphis, talking to you... And I know what I have to do now. I gotta keep breathing."

In our text the disciples were locked up in a house. Their Lord was dead. They were gathered together in fear, gathered together in grief. Breathing is instinctual, which is good at the times when it is hard to breathe. Times when sadness, or fear, or anger, or grief take hold and make breathing feel like one more thing we have to find the energy to do.

And this is how Jesus found his disciples, afraid, locked in a room. And he appeared before them.

He was dead. And he was there, alive.

The text says that after seeing his hands and side, the disciples rejoiced. Twice Jesus greets them, "Peace be with you." Then he tells them that God sent him, and he will now send them. This isn't all he says. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Big things happen when God breathes. The earth is created. Dry bones come to life.

Jesus breathed out, and all the disciples could do was breathe in the Holy Spirit.

I am learning to talk about the Holy Spirit. I didn't grow up talking about the Holy Spirit and couldn't name what it was, but I felt it. I felt it distinctly at Camp of the Pines on Lake DeGray in Arkansas. The Spirit came over me and gave me an assurance about God. I felt it while leading a group of five and six year olds in Montreat one summer. The Spirit came over me and helped me to enjoy being who God made me to be. Sometimes I've even felt the Spirit in Sunday worship. And I felt it at the Metro State Women's Prison.

Some of you have heard me talk about my experiences as a chaplaincy intern at the Metro State Women's Prison here in Atlanta. One Friday the head chaplain received a phone call. An inmate's mother had died. I was given the assignment to go and get the woman from her cell, to bring her back to the chaplaincy offices, and to tell her this news. I was terrified. I could not look her in the eyes as we walked from her building. She had arrived at the prison just that week and was shell-shocked by her surroundings. She kept calling me 'mam' and asking for permission to speak. When we sat down I told her that we had received a call, and that her mom was dead, and that I was so sorry. And then she began to cry, to weep, to wail. She kept saying how alone she was. She breathed out a pain and sorrow that I had never felt before. Pain laced with deep regret. I sat there and tried to breathe it in. As she wept I found myself with my bible open and tears running down my face. We sat like that for a long time.

After some conversation and attempts to make phone calls I asked her if she would like for me to read from the bible. She said yes but didn't have any requests. This was new ground for me. I was scared of making a mistake, scared of somehow making this awful situation worse. I read from the Psalms and from Isaiah. I read about people who felt alone.

I breathed in and let the Spirit guide me. In that office, which was so full of pain and hurt, the Spirit somehow found room to enter in. The Spirit came into that space and held onto us in that sorrow.

And eventually I had to walk her back to her cell. She was new, sharing a cell with five women she did not know, and she would be there all weekend with no contact to the outside world. As I walked away I prayed that the Spirit would fill her cell and hold her close.

"Jesus breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' He was dead, and then he conquered death. He breathed on them, and he breathes on us. This same Spirit is for us. This same Spirit gives us strength if we will just breathe it in. God is breathing on us, right here, right now, and big things happen when God breathes.

Amen.