

Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

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“Never place a period
where God has placed a comma”

| Gracie Allen |



God is still speaking,

**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



SERMON

“Where, then, do we stand?”

Rev. David P. Weaver
March 30, 2008

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Scripture: John 20:19-31

Let's go back and visit that house again. Jesus' disciples have locked themselves into a house in Jerusalem. They are hunted men, or at least they believe they are, because they followed a man who many had hoped was the Jewish Messiah. Some people, including a few of the disciples, had hoped Jesus would use his amazing power to defeat the Romans once and for all. Clearly that didn't happen.

Now the disciples fear for their very lives, perhaps not unlike Saddam Hussein's cabinet officers felt when they first learned their faces were on that infamous deck of playing cards.

The disciples are terrified, yes. But is that all they feel?

- Are they filled with self-doubt, wondering why they had followed this unorthodox rabbi in the first place?
- Is there a deep sense of sadness that their dreams have turned to ashes? Do they feel betrayed, even angry, that Jesus had allowed himself to be taken without so much as a fight—had refused to use for himself the amazing power he'd so often used for others?
- Do they feel lost, hopeless?
- Are they overwhelmed with grief that this one they loved was gone? This one they had spent three years of their life with night and day—was simply gone, how could it be?
- Are they filled with shame as they remember how they abandoned Jesus, even pretended not to know him at the end?

The writer of this spare account only identifies fear in that locked house. But these followers are cut of the same cloth as we are here today. Any one of us could have been in that house. And it's not hard to imagine that though they are locked in together, each one is also very alone. Each one is locked in his own little world, his mind going over the details of what had happened again and again and again.

Many of us know what it's like to have a loved one die. The disciples now know as well. In times like this our minds have a mind of their own. At times it hardly feels like living.

- We go over and over those last weeks he was in the hospital.
- We remember every detail of that last conversation before she went out the door that last time.
- We wonder what might have happened if only we had gone to see the doctor earlier.

- If only we hadn't let him go on that camping trip with his friends.
- If only we had noticed how quiet she had become those last months before taking her own life.
- We walk through the grocery store and happen upon Campbell's tomato soup, his favorite—he loved a bowl with a toasted cheese sandwich—and without warning tears stream down our face, our shoulders shake, and we look up and down the aisle for a place to hide our unexpected loss of composure.

Many of us know what it's like to lose a loved one. The disciples now know firsthand as well. Locked in a house and in their own little world, their minds seem to have a mind of their own. At times it hardly feels like living.

It's into this room filled with fear and death that Jesus appears among his disciples, and very quickly everything is transformed. The very first words out of Jesus' mouth are "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you," Jesus says again, as if he knows their disbelieving eyes and ears will need to hear the words more than once.

And then the writer records a most curious detail: Jesus breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Now, one thought that might come to our minds is to pray that Jesus had not just eaten chicken with black bean and garlic sauce. That would be a problem.

But another thought might be to remember the passage from the second creation account in Genesis chapter two:

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.¹

Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Creation and re-creation.

Or we might remember that passage from the prophet Ezekiel about that valley filled with dry bones.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I 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."

¹ Genesis 2:7 New Revised Standard Version.

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’”

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.²

Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Creation and re-creation.

A colleague recently told me about being called by a funeral director to be with a family overcome with grief at the unexpected death of the family matriarch. When he arrived, they were all gathered in a room. It was a large family, standing room only, with people spilling over every available couch and chair.

It was clear the family was adrift. They were like a team without their captain. Perhaps a bit like the nation the day President Kennedy was shot. The matriarch’s death had come so unexpectedly, no one in the family seemed to know what to do next, or who was in charge, or how to make decisions. The room was filled with a sense of heaviness.

As the pastor offer words of comfort, a young family arrived with a baby that had been born a few weeks earlier, a little bundle, with amazingly soft skin and the tiniest fingers you can imagine, like little Katherine Elisabeth Levin whom we baptized here today.

In an instant the atmosphere in that room changed as everyone wanted a chance to ooh and ah over her. Faces lined with grief suddenly transformed with delight in the presence of new life. Eyes that minutes before had seemed vacant sparkled once again. In the presence of that new little bundle of life, you could hardly believe it was the same room or the same family.

When Jesus appeared in that room with his disciples, he offered them a deep sense of peace. He offered them forgiveness. And in an act of creation, an act of re-creation, he breathed on them the breath of life, and hearts and lives that had minutes before been

² Ezekiel 37:1-14 New Revised Standard Version.

filled with fear were now filled with new life, were filled with the very presence of God's Spirit. It was an act of creation, of re-creation, of resurrection.

There are many questions about the whole notion of resurrection and about Jesus' resurrection in particular. We can never know what actually happened earlier that same day, Easter morning, when the writers tell us Jesus was raised from the dead. For some reason, in God's wisdom, God did not see fit to have any human witnesses to the actual moment of Jesus' resurrection.

So, since that very first day some of us have had a lot of questions.

- Was Jesus actually physically raised from the dead, or was he spiritually raised from the dead?
- What kind of body did he have after he was raised, a body like yours and mine or something different?
- Is the entire story to be taken literally or metaphorically?
- Was the story made up from whole cloth as some have claimed?

Today, we cannot definitively answer these questions.

But what we do know is this: transformation, new life and resurrection happen in our world. When Jesus breathed the presence of God's Spirit onto the disciples who were locked away in that fear-filled room it set them free, transformed them and gave them new life. And that sounds a lot like resurrection.

Often the focus of this text is not on Jesus at all, but on Thomas.

The standard interpretation of this story had been that Thomas is a villain because he dared to doubt, he dared to disbelieve until he saw physical proof for himself. The implication of this interpretation is that faith is about right beliefs. But faith cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs. Such faith runs the risk of simply being blind allegiance or empty religious habit.

A more modern interpretation of this story has been that Thomas is an example of enlightened virtue—he had the chutzpah to question. Doubt is good—in fact, doubt is the only honest thing. Real thinkers doubt everything and can be certain about nothing. The implication of this interpretation is that faith is un-intellectual. Such faith runs the risk of being faith in name only, having no real substance at all.

But there is a clear lack of responsibility in both of these two extremes. Neither approach requires much of anything from us whether we clutch onto our favorite beliefs like a fencepost, or whether we doubt everything, committing to nothing. Neither of these approaches requires any significant spiritual depth. Both approaches allow faith to remain a matter of the head.

It's true that faith does require serious thought and reflection. It requires willingness to take stands as Thomas did. And it requires humility to recognize that our choice of places to stand may at times be wrong. But faith cannot simply be a matter of the head.

True faith is also a matter of the spirit, God's Spirit transforming our world.

“We need to claim God's Resurrection Spirit as being as near as our next breath and as lively and uncontrolled as the wind....

When God's lively wind breathes within us, we become spirit-filled and spirit-centered, able to do more than we can imagine as God's partners in healing the world and our personal lives.”³

Allen Hunter Armstrong, retired professor at Claremont School of Theology (where our own Michelle Mellott and Judy Green-Davis are students) encouraged his students to wonder what it would be like to if we truly breathed God's Spirit in with every breath.⁴

- How would our spiritual lives be different?
- What would it be like to place yourself in that room when Jesus breathed God's Spirit on them, on us?
- How would your day be different if you breathed God's Spirit in with every breath?
- What would your world be like if you sent God's Spirit out into the world each time you breathed out?

Perhaps we're not accustomed to thinking about God's Spirit on such intimate terms. And yet I can't help but think my life would be affected by such awareness. It's not hard to imagine that my relationships in my family, at Beatitudes Campus, in my life apart from work would be affected by the awareness that I am a bearer of God's own Spirit every time I breathe.

What would happen in this community of faith if we kept this in mind? How would our world be changed?

Where, then, do we stand?

- Some of us may stand in a place of significant doubt, as did Thomas. God's Spirit is there with us, in our every breath.
- Some of us may stand in a place of confident faith, and God's Spirit breathes with us in this place as well.

³Bruce G. Epperly, *Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary*, March 30, 2008. www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2007-2008/2008-03-30.shtml

⁴ Ibid.

- Some of us may stand having trouble experiencing God's presence at all, as happens from time to time. We may feel abandoned by God, but even there the Spirit breathes with us.
- Still others of us may stand in a place of gratitude, noticing God in so many ways, and there too God's spirit breathes with us.

Wherever we stand, God's Spirit is present in our every breath.

My friends, in the beginning our God breathed into the first woman and man the breath of life and created living beings.

When Ezekiel found the people without hope, our God provided a vision of dry bones brought back to life, and said "I will put my spirit within you and you shall live!"

On Easter Sunday when the disciples were locked away in fear, our God came and said "Peace be with you," and breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

And this same God is here today, in our every breath.

Amen.