

The Second Sunday of Easter
A Gospel and a Sermon in Two Parts

April 28, 2018

In the name of the one who names us and claims us and makes us his own, amen.

I don't usually announce the title of a sermon, but this is called "A Gospel and a Sermon in Two Parts".

Part I:

It is appropriate that sometimes my dear spouse refers to that current cultural phenomenon that airs on HBO Sunday nights at nine o'clock and don't you dare try to call me then, as Crown of Thorns because soap opera doesn't get any better than this Gospel. When we left our heroes in last week's episode, they were being womansplained by Mary Magdalene that Jesus had indeed defied the hold of the tomb and was ascending to his father. The disciples' reaction to the news? Fear. Locking themselves away from the potential of danger and of any retribution that could have followed them, having been identified as Jesus' followers. I can imagine them clustered together for moral support, trying to digest the news that Mary Magdalene had relayed. Holding their breath. After all, just a week ago, their beloved teacher and master had taken his last...breath. And now they are barricaded in the upper room gasping and confused.

UCC minister Bruce Epperly writes an excellent blog called the Adventurous Lectionary in which he points out that resurrection is just a breath away. He reminds us that "breath is essential to the Hebraic and Christian visions. Genesis describes God's initial creative act as breathing over a creative void, bringing forth the possibility of the emerging and evolving universe. God breathes into humankind, animating what was before inert. Everything that breathes can praise God."

As we have done now for millennia. As an aside, something to consider, we could even be breathing some of the same molecules as the psalmist we read this morning praising God saying the Lord is his strength and his song. Theoretical physicists suggest that more than 99 out of 100 of our breaths will contain molecules exhaled by Augustus Caesar. Or Cleopatra. Or Van Morrison. So why not the breath of a frightened disciple hyperventilating in an upper room. Just a thought.

Reverend Epperly points out that the gospel begins with breath, saying "On Easter night, Jesus mysteriously appears, apparently defying the laws of physics, and breathes new life into his followers, They have heard the message that Christ is risen, yet they are still stunned and overwhelmed, not knowing the meaning of the resurrection. But now the Risen One is with them.

He breathes on them, filling them with God's spirit and endowing them with power, creativity, and authority."

The breath of Jesus commissioned the disciples to let go of their fear, unlock the door and live the good news into the world. To breathe with God's power.

But wait, let's count heads; someone is missing. Thomas came late to the party and was understandably skeptical. It must have been so hard for him to believe, to share in the relief of his friends claiming that they had seen the Lord. After such fear and...breath-holding...no wonder he doubted. He felt totally out of place.

Reverend Epperly continues "It is a credit to the disciples that they gave Thomas breathing space and allowed him to live with his questions. He missed out on the spiritual revival of the upper room and wanted proof that Jesus was alive. His quest was not just intellectual, it was experiential and spiritual. He wanted to see Jesus, feel his breath and touch his body. He wanted the real presence of the risen Jesus and not just talk about it. When Jesus returns to the group, he is amazed and transformed and he can breathe again."

He concludes by telling us that "Easter is embodied. It is known by God's breathing in us. It is known by embracing the pain of our world. In God's love for the world," he writes, "God enables us to have the stature to become God's partners in healing the world, practicing resurrection with each new day. Breathing deeply, we can face our doubts, knowing that we are never outside the scope of inspiration." ("Inspiration", get it?) Breathing deeply, we can face our doubts. Through our breath and our love and our labor we become co-creators of the kingdom.

You wouldn't think that we would need to be reminded to breathe, but sometimes we do. Like the disciples, when we are afraid we hold our breath. In childbirth, women around the world hold their breath until they hear that first breath taken by that which they have created. Every breath is a new beginning.

Greg Richardson, a monk in Big Sur California (a description which makes me want to check his credentials) says that "all of us have times when it is difficult to catch our breath. We may be exerting ourselves, or caught up in the excitement of the moment. There may be something within us or something in the world around us which makes it challenging. Sometimes we need to pause, take a deep breath in, and let it out. We may need a few deep breaths. It could be because we are tired or frustrated, or we have not had a moment to spare. Caught between the past and the future we need to draw a few deep breaths...Each breath we take is filled with potential new beginnings."

Part II:

The sad part is that every new beginning is the result of a new ending.

So here we are. Standing precariously balanced on the cliff's edge of change and trying to remember to breathe.

One of the lessons I hope I have learned over the course of my semi-adulthood are Louise Penny's four rules that lead to wisdom: I don't know, I need help, I'm sorry and I was wrong. My brother is retiring at the end of June and he asked me the other day "Are you tired of people asking you what you're going to do next? *I'M* tired of people asking me what I'm going to do next!" Me? I am trying to embrace the "I don't know" at the same time I am trying to remember to breathe.

A fiction author that I like, Kerry Greenwood, had one of her characters describe why she had left her career in finance to open a bakery. She said "What the world needs, I am convinced, after more peace and charity and love and fresh water and food and literate women, is more time off to waste as the worker chooses. Everyone at the moment works too hard."

So I'm taking a break. Like Thomas, I will be taking a little breathing room to get my bearings and wait to see what will come next. I will be open to see where God's breath will push me. Bruce Epperly reminds me that doors will open by quoting John, "The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit." He says "God's spirit sets us free, it breathes on us and gives us energy for adventures ahead. It inspires to be God's companions in our time and place."

And my wish for all of us? That we be inspired, in both meanings of the word. That we breathe in the breath of God. That we breathe in the love of God. That we breathe in the life of God. And that we breathe out God's love on all those we meet along the way.

So may it be written. So may it be done.

Amen.