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John 20:19-23

Breath of Life

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“What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” I’ve found this question helpful when I’m trying to make a decision and, I weighing the options, I hear myself say, “I’m afraid of...” followed by an explanation of what I fear about the options before me. This is a question physician and author, Spencer Johnson, asked and talked about in his 1998 book *Who Moved My Cheese?* The book revolves around four characters who live in a maze. All of them love cheese. When the cheese disappears, Sniff and Scurry head into the maze to search for new cheese while Hem and Haw feel betrayed and start complaining that someone stole their cheese. You can probably guess which two characters might do well to ask themselves the author’s question, “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” What I know is that fear is a powerful motivator. Ask anyone who has experienced domestic violence. Ask a teen who is being bullied at school. Ask someone who has received a life-changing diagnosis. Fear changes everything. And we are all afraid of something. How would your life be different if you stopped being afraid of whatever you are afraid of? And what would it take to help you not be afraid?

Our text today begins with some very afraid disciples. This part of the author of John’s story takes place immediately following the resurrection story. You will recall there were three people at the tomb that day. There was Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, who is a symbol the author used for all followers of Jesus; the Beloved Disciple is you and me. In the story, Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw the empty tomb and the discarded linen wrappings but did not encounter Jesus. Mary, though, not only saw the empty tomb, but had her very own encounter with Jesus. Her response to that encounter was to proclaim that she had seen her Lord and to go and tell the others that she had seen.

Right after that is where we pick up. This is John 20:19-23:

¹⁹ When 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 Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when

they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

So...did the other disciples not believe Mary? I feel like if they had, we would not find them afraid and hiding behind locked doors. “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” I feel like they would have been out looking for Jesus. But instead, they were working hard to fly under the radar of the authorities. They certainly didn’t want to end up like Jesus. Until Jesus popped into the room, the disciples were convinced they had been wrong about Jesus. He was not going to save them from the oppression of the Roman Empire. What did Mary know anyway? Just because she stayed with Jesus at the cross until he died while they were who knows where...hiding. And just because she was the first to get to the empty tomb. That doesn’t mean she was telling the truth. She couldn’t possibly be trusted to accurately report her own experience and encounter with Jesus, could she?

The language that brought Jesus into the room in this part of the story is worth noticing, “Peace be with you,” he said.

You might recall Jesus said something that sounded a lot like this when he and the disciples ate their last meal together. He said to them, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The peace Jesus offered is not peace “as the world gives.” The peace the world gives should be understood here as forced peace that was kept using violence and oppression. Pax Romana. There may not have been fighting in the streets, but it was still dangerous for the disciples and people like them to step out of line. In his commentary on this text, Luther Seminary professor Dr. Matt Skinner writes, “[Jesus] gives peace that provides solace in the face of persecution, a promise of new possibilities, and confidence in his ability to overcome “the world” (16:33).”¹

¹ Skinner Matt, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost/commentary-on-john-2019-23-4>, accessed April 27, 2022.

After the disciples heard Jesus and after they saw his hands and side, like Mary hours before, they confessed that they too had seen the Lord. What would a moment like that be like? What would it be like to be that level of afraid for so long and then realize you didn't have to feel that anymore? I've heard members of the LGBTQ+ community describe how they felt when they made the decision to come out like that. I've heard immigrants, who finally receive the documentation they need, talk about the relief that comes when they don't have to be afraid of deportation every moment of every day like that. I imagine it's like the release of a pressure valve. I wonder if the disciples suddenly realized how their fear and grief had affected their bodies physically. You know, like that moment after a stressful event when you realize you've been holding all your stress and anxiety in your neck and shoulders? I bet the ones who hadn't been able to eat because they were so upset finally felt hungry.

But Jesus was not there only to comfort them. The text says, "...he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This moment recalls a similar moment, way back in Genesis in the second creation story, when God breathed life into humanity, making them co-workers in creating and tending to all of creation, "...then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being." Here in the Gospel of John, the same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation acts again. Humanity receives the breath of God anew and with it, the call to birth a new world. Jesus breathed the Spirit of life into his followers and reminded them of their calling; the calling that has been ours from the moment the first human was created, the same calling Jesus inherited and all the others before him: to restore and heal and tend life.²

The demands of this calling are very different than the demands of the capitalist society in which we live. Success is not measured by the number of tasks we complete or how many slots on our calendars are filled up. And I do not bring this call of ours to your attention to add yet another thing for you to feel guilty about not doing as well as you think you ought to or to add more to your to-do list that is already mind numbingly long, or to pile on more reasons for the compassion fatigue a lot of us feel. **Our calling as co-creators with God, our calling as followers of Jesus, to create a new kind of world, is not about doing more, it's about doing things differently.** And honestly, I can't think of a better time to do

² <https://enfleshed.com/liturgy-that-matters-subscription-library/>, accessed April 27, 2022.

things differently. We are still trying to figure out what this post-COVID world is going to be. To be clear...we are not really at "post-COVID" yet. Why can't we create a world more like our idea of heaven and less like the world's idea of hell?

If you were here on Easter Sunday, you may remember I talked a lot about using our imaginations to envision a different world, the kind of world that Jesus talked about. I believe it is our imaginations that will help us see not only a different kind of world, but a different way of bringing it about. Think of our imaginations and the Holy Spirit as roommates in our brains and hearts. How cool is it that the same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation, the same Spirit that got the disciples doing something besides being afraid, is hanging around with us too, helping us create something new? We tend to be cautious folk though, some of us adverse to risk-taking. Sometimes I think we have *locked our doors* to the possibility that the Holy Spirit is doing, and can do, a new thing in and around us. Sometimes the idea of going in search of our cheese once it's been moved is frightening. Maybe we secretly wish Jesus would miraculously pass through our barricaded doors so we could encounter him for ourselves. Then we would believe something new could really happen!

The truth is, only very few people actually encountered Jesus in person. We depend on the stories they told, and their children told, and their children's children, to form our faith and our truth about what it means to follow him. Even though we have never had our own physical encounter with him, we have met him in the stories of other people. Those stories have been filtered by the experiences of every person who has told them. Those stories are our stories too.

Jesus, too, depended on the faith of the ones who came before him and the testimony of their encounters with God in the world. Like him, we need to allow voices from the past to inform our encounters with the Sacred among us today. We are changed by the witness of the biblical storytellers who have come before us. And this should remind us of the importance of telling our own stories today. The stories we tell of Divinity among us are a gift, not only to the ones listening today, but to the ones who are yet to come. Our stories will help them know who God is and who they are. Our stories will help them imagine and believe in a world that is different and a God who has worked through humans for a very long time.

As we tell and live our stories, I hope they will reflect a certain reverence for what has already been created. I hope there will be tales of saving the bees, crystal clear water, and UPcycling used stuff into new creations. I hope our stories will be of dismantling centuries of racism and I hope Black and brown people in this country will one day tell stories of what they did the day they realized they didn't have to be afraid anymore. These are the kinds of stories I believe Jesus would want disciples today to be able to imagine and believe and go out and tell. They are stories where relationships matter more than efficiency and where the telling of them is life-giving, even life-saving, to the world today, and also for all the ones who will be born into a world that could be radically different because of us telling and living a different story. And here is my fervent hope...I hope when they hear our stories that there will be so many stories about people sitting down to meals with all kinds of people that the ones who come long after us will hear them and say, "My gosh...all they did was eat." Amen.