

While We Wait: Breathe
John 20: 19-31

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”¹
Breathing is so central to who we are; it’s essential! Yet, until one struggles for breath, it is something we more often than not take for granted. After all, it just happens. It is an autonomic action, something our system does involuntarily, without intentionality. We don’t even have to think about it. But perhaps we should, perhaps we should.

This was evening on the first day again, still Easter day. Up until this moment the only person who had witnessed the risen Christ was Mary Magdalene. The disciples huddled together behind closed doors, locked away in fear of the Jews. Their own people! With terror filling their hearts and the trauma of all they had witnessed over the last few days filling their minds, they found comfort in being with one another. Jesus appeared with words of peace, showing them his fresh wounds, reassuring them of his presence, calling them once more to follow. Think on that moment for a bit. Imagine yourself there, sheltering in place with friends all of you in shock, disbelief, and grief and having experienced a living nightmare in which one of the closest people in the world to you was betrayed by someone in your close group, then betrayed again by people of your own faith, and finally horribly murdered right in front of you. Consider how you would feel at such a time.

The other day I was listening to an interview of a student who was present at the massacre at Columbine High School, nineteen years ago this past Friday. This young woman, still a child herself, had seen her best friend executed by a fellow classmate, and the reporter asked her, ‘How are you?’ A question we have all heard way too often in the wake of disasters.

¹ John 20: 21-22 NRSV

From hurricanes to shootings, there is a rush of media to ask what is going on in the hearts and minds of victims who have witnessed horrendous tragedy of unimaginable proportion, to ask them to relive moments of unspeakable awfulness. With bated breath we on the other end of the screens wait to hear their answers. Well-meaning? Probably. It's a way of trying to relate to something removed from our own personal experience, a way of showing concern. Yet sometimes it's too early to talk, too early to even be able to identify emotions, too early to make sense of any of it. That is where the disciples were on that same day – torn apart from within by the events of the last few days, emotions caught up in an tangled whirlwind, incapable of figuring out what the next move should be much less have the courage to do so. When Jesus came and stood among them, it was not with a rush to fix their problems, to address their pain, to take them away from their experience. It was gentle. "Peace be with you."² Certainly, they rejoiced! But before they could get caught up in that emotion that was on the *other* side of the pendulum, he said again. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."³ He did not negate or try to control the volatility of the moment; he did not make any promises that all would be wonderful from here on out. He was simply and fully present. 'Peace be with you.'

It began with a breath, a breath of holy, life-giving air that grounded them in their relationship with Jesus, a breath that pointed the way to God. Breath leads to life. Breath is life. As someone who worked as a therapist for quite some time, I marvel at Jesus' wisdom that evening. When someone has been brutalized emotionally, when confusion and chaos are at war within one's soul, when feelings threaten to flood like a tidal wave, it is *not* the time to explore that internal whirlwind. It's *not* the time to begin planning next steps. Instead, it is time to breathe. In yoga we are taught to breathe into the motion, to not resist but lean into it with breathing, to embrace your body as it is with its talents *and* limitations, to simply be. Likewise

² John 20: 19b NRSV

³ John 20: 21b NRSV

with the disciples, Jesus did not admonish them to feel other than what they were experiencing. There was no contest or tug of war about reality, simply the peace of breathing God's life force into them.

I am going to ask you to trust me a little bit with this next part. Some of you have experienced my doing similar exercises before during sermons; for others it will be new. We are going to breathe intentionally for a bit. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Breathe so that your diaphragm expands when you inhale and contracts as you exhale. Do that a few times so you can feel the pattern as your breath moves through your body. Now with your eyes still open find something to look at, an intentional focus or drishti as it's called in yoga. Don't clench your fists, just let them be. Plant your feet solidly on the ground. Feel them firmly rooted on the earth. Now, close your eyes and let the world fall away. Breathe. With your hand on your stomach, feel the breath as it enters through your nose and slides into your lungs. Let your diaphragm expand with air. Slowly exhale, watching your breath as it leaves once more. Breathe and note the movement of the air as it comes in, moves down your throat, filling your lungs with life. Exhale and sense it move out, leaving behind life-giving nourishment and joy. Breathe. Just breathe. And Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' Breathe, receive God into the depth of your being. Breathe. Open your eyes, now. For a few moments, relax, just be in the moment. Breathe.

That was Jesus' gift to the disciples when their world had shattered right in front of them. It is still our gift today. Breathe, breathe in the very presence of God. Pause from the craziness, the battle of tweets and accusations, the looming threat of war, the embarrassment and shame. Breathe, breathe in God's Spirit and let the rest of it all go. Find your place in God.

Now Thomas was not with them in this time of amazing discovery and was understandably skeptical. He had not had a chance to breathe yet, to receive God. Truth be told, *none* of them believed the initial news of the risen Jesus. They *all* ran away and hid; they

all were in shock; no one really accepted the possibility that Jesus could be alive. Instead it was Thomas who put his doubts into words; he dared verbalize them and demanded proof. Let's not be so harsh on Thomas. I applaud his honest reactions. His openness about his misgivings paved the way for a leap of faith that would sustain them through the birth of the early Church and helps us understand today that doubt is an integral part of the journey of faith. Sometimes, many times, the best course of action is to let the doubts and questions stand as they are and breathe, simply breathe.

Breathe. Breathe into the anger, the hurt, the despair. Breathe into the doubts, the uncertainties, breathe into it all, and let God's breath become part of us, sending us out into the world, a world that often needs that same reminder. When caught up in the wildness of life, when beaten down by the storms of living, when ensnared on tricky questions and doubts, breathe. I remember one time I had a client who had endured a great deal of violence in her young life, memories of which she had hidden deeply within the recesses of her heart. One day as we talked she began to panic as they all began to resurface. I told her to breathe. She looked at me like I had lost my mind. Like breathing was going to do anything for all that she had faced in life? Like breathing would give some answers? I repeated, 'breathe'. Looking directly at her, our eyes locked and our breathing fell into a rhythm of peace. No problems were solved, no pain was eradicated, no anger alleviated. But she could breathe, she could find grounding, she could find herself, and freed from the threatening flood of emotions, she found the courage to look at her life, embracing it with all its joys and jagged edges. She found life.

Jesus asked his disciples to trust him that evening, to breathe into their sadness and uncertainties. Jesus showed Thomas how to breathe into his doubts, to let them become part of his faith. Jesus does the same for us now. While the disciples waited for Pentecost, they learned to do the very simple art of breathing that is an innate gift of life but whose richness is

so many times yet untapped. In doing so, they discovered that Jesus' presence was still among them, and they began to recognize the new manifestation of their relationship with the Holy.

As people, we don't like to hurt and grieve; we want life to be simple, joyful, predictable. We don't want snow and ice in April! We don't want to be distracted by doubts and questions; we want answers and certainties. We want a world different from the one in which we live, one in which people are treated with honesty and dignity, one in which we do not have to be afraid of the future. Yet life is more often than not a roller coaster – with pain we cannot comprehend or control, with unknowns that hang heavily over us, with very real fears that the world is falling apart - and with unspeakable joy of the sheer beauty of life. And so we breathe, taking the moment to simply breathe into it all, and we accept the Spirit that God breathes into us unlocking the doors that entrap us and prevent us from fully living. We breathe, and like Thomas, we come to embrace our faith as our own. “*My Lord and my God!*”⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who was one of the first to publicly denounce Hitler and his actions. He railed against the injustices that were happening all around him. He angrily protested the perversion of the Gospel and of faith. And sometimes he doubted, he questioned whether evil might indeed prevail. He knew the safe road, and it was even offered to him with an opportunity to immigrate to the US. Yet he chose to live in Germany, to become involved in his passion for truth, to live his faith. While he was imprisoned, a direct result of his condemnation of Hitler and Nazism, he wrote a letter to a friend with his concerns and doubts and with his Thomas moment of realization of the faith he was called to live:

During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity,...the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the *constant knowledge of death and resurrection*.... I discovered later,

⁴ John 20: 28b NRSV

and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith..... By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith.....⁵

That is faith – to look at life, to look at others, to look at ourselves, and to recognize the messiness, the doubts, the fears, the exhilarations – to see all of life with its myriad manifestations – and then to breathe allowing God's breath to penetrate our souls to become woven into our very beings. As we breathe, we realize that God is still here, maybe not in the way we anticipated but still very much present, *and* that faith in God is personal, intimate, ours. Breathe. Let us pray.

God of Easter and life, help us to breathe. And as we breathe, may the realization dawn in us that faith grows through the doubts and questions, through the challenges and joys, through all that may happen to us. Then we can see you and our relationship with you more clearly and with the apostle Paul we can proclaim that we are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 2nd ed., London, 1971, p. 369; quoted by Robert Atwell, *Celebrating the Saints*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2010, p. 179