

Taking In The Breath Of Jesus

April 8, 2018 – Confirmation Sunday

I heard this story a few years ago. A mom and her daughter were driving through a major metropolitan area. This child had been involved in the Catachesis of the Good Shepherd and faith formation known as the Worship Center. Part of the Worship Center experience is to tell a story or a parable or a gospel text, and then begin to ask “wonder” questions. “I wonder what it’s like to be a sheep?” “I wonder what it’s like to be out of the sheep fold?” “I wonder what it’s like to be...”, and then just fill in the blank.

So, as this mother and daughter were driving through the city, they would come to corner stoplights, and after a few stoplights the daughter turned to her mother and said “Mom, why do they still have Jesus hanging from the cross? I wonder why?” Like any good parent, she was silent, and just continued to drive on their way home. After a few more blocks, they turned in to their driveway and she turned the car off. The daughter said “Mom, I think I know why they still have Jesus hanging from the cross. Maybe it’s because they don’t believe he’s been raised from the dead.”

Interesting perspective, isn’t it?

There are certainly lots of people whose company they could join, because just as we heard last Sunday, and now this Sunday in continuation of John’s gospel text, the disciples didn’t believe Mary Magdalene. She came with this astounding and overwhelming news that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and they failed to believe. And then that evening, we hear in the witness of the scripture, that the disciples were in a locked room for fear of the Jewish authorities. In to the midst of their fear, in to the midst of their worry and confusion and doubt and sadness and mourning, in to that appears the risen Christ. And his first words to them are “Peace be with you”. Peace be with you. And so that they might believe, he shows them his hands and his side. And upon the revelation of his wounds, they come to believe. “It’s the Lord! It’s you!” And then he breathes on them the gift of the spirit.

The scripture texts vary as to when we understand the spirit to be given to the church. In Luke/Acts (the reason I say this is that the person who wrote Luke also wrote the book of Acts), there is a period of time between Jesus’s ascension and the gifting of the spirit 50 days after the resurrection and ascension. Then the spirit is given. But in John’s gospel, the spirit arrives and is given, breathed on the disciples by Jesus the risen Christ on Easter day.

As you may know in John’s gospel, the last time we heard about Jesus being alive we see that all that has been required of him has been completed or is finished, and he hands over or he gives over his spirit, “It is finished”. And then the next thing we see, the next words we hear, are Jesus gifting, through his breath, the very spirit he gave over, and now has given to them. By virtue of baptism, has been given to us. To us.

But Thomas wasn't present, perhaps because he was afraid or worried, or overwhelmed. But just like the disciples didn't believe Mary, Thomas didn't believe his brothers and sisters on their witness. And so Jesus appears a week later. They're still huddled in fear, apparently, even though they've been gifted with the spirit, and Jesus shows Thomas his hands and side and says "please, probe the wounds". And then we hear the most powerful affirmation in John's gospel, the most powerful affirmation of a person witnessing to their faith, "My Lord, and my God". How clear can Thomas be?

The important thing to know here is that the gospel was not written for Thomas, or for the disciples, or for Mary Magdalene. This gospel was written for you and me. Because we find ourselves in the same place of those that Jesus refers to, as John's gospel concludes, when Jesus says "You believe because you've seen. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed."

Believing is a challenging thing these days, isn't it? At least in my own experience, I listen to people's stories of sadness or betrayal, or being disappointed. I remember listening this last Wednesday to the news of speeches being given on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. I remember where I was, in downtown St. Louis on Thursday the 4th of April 1968.

Have any of you been to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis? I went there as a young person in high school. The hotel was dilapidated and torn down, and now it's the National Civil Rights Museum. A phrase caught my attention there. I heard someone say "this is the very place of the crucifixion, but just blocks from here is the resurrection".

We're accustomed to crucifixion, we see death all around us. We experience it by the death of a family member. I'm reminded of the hockey team in Canada whose lives were taken just this week by virtue of an accident. Can you imagine how difficult it must be for those families to believe in the possibility of resurrection? So, sisters and brothers, it is not an easy thing for us to move in to. It requires something of us. It requires the gift of the spirit, to help us believe, to help us move in to the possibility of life, and death, and then above all, life after death.

In just a few moments we will have the opportunity to reaffirm and receive and perhaps confirm folks who have been on their own journeys, who've been sharing their stories of faith, many of which perhaps include the possibility of doubting, or being wounded, or being overwhelmed with a sense of fear.

There is a famous pastor whose name is Nadia Bolz-Weber who says "Welcome to the church. We will disappoint you." The reality is, do you know of any community that gathers that doesn't include the possibility of disappointment? That's the reality of our lives. And yet, that's not the end. By God's grace, we're called to be people who know ourselves just as the disciples knew themselves, as being sent. They were gifted by the breathing of Jesus on them with the Spirit. That gifting, Jesus says, as he was sent, so are you. And as they are sent, so are we. Each one of us is sent into this community,

into those relationships and circles of influence that each of us are a part of, each of us are sent to be proclaimers of the resurrected Christ. The good news that even in the face of failure and betrayal and death and violence, even in the face of all of those things, we are a people who claim our hope is found in the resurrected Christ.

That's a bold statement, and often not one easily lived into. But this is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our belief in what we say, but more importantly in what we do.

I had the privilege of being here a few weeks ago for an evening with those who are a part of the Pilgrims process. I want to apologize, I use St Andrew for a lot of my references because I've heard people say "we can't grow the church because there aren't really any people who are interested in listening to us." This is my second time since serving as bishop among you, and you know what is most fascinating, sisters and brothers? I heard around the circle last year and this year phrases like this: "It's because of [and then fill in the name] that I became part of this community. It's because of..."

Now we all know it probably because of Father Richard, right? But not just because of him, it's because of all of you. All of you are living examples of the risen Christ, in this community of Kokomo, and beyond. I give thanks for your witness because I'm able to go to other places and say "you know what? The church is growing in Kokomo." So I can't agree with you when you say there just aren't people to invite, I've heard people's witnesses that they're here because of someone else's invitation. So it is possible I think for us, even in Indiana, to grow the church of disciples, following Jesus, the resurrected Christ, because your living, breathing, inspired example of that, for me, and for many others.

So as we continue our prayer this day, I'd invite you to pray for those persons that you may know who are finding it challenging in their own life to believe in the possibility of resurrection, to really grab hold of the possibility of new life in the face of the things they might be challenged or overwhelmed by. We all know those persons in our own circle of life, in our sphere of influence. Let's uphold them in our thought and prayer, and pray that we may continue to know ourselves as being gifted by the spirit, taking in the breath of Jesus's life so that we might know ourselves to be sent.

Let us pray:

Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, you break through the locks of gated communities, and hardened and fearful hearts. Accept our doubts and fears, heal our desire for certainty, and by your spirit's gentle touch, make us a people forgiven, healed, renewed. Through Jesus Christ, the giver of peace, in whose name we pray, now and forever.

Amen