

“Resurrection Life: Jesus Sets Us Free”

Acts 2:1-18; John 20:19-23

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

We’ve come a long way since Easter, since the Resurrection of Jesus—50 days, to be precise.

In those 50 days, we’ve focused on the resurrection life that Jesus makes possible for his followers.

Over the past seven weeks, we’ve explored some of the ways Jesus changed the lives of his followers, making possible what was not possible before—new life in the true pattern of life God desired for human beings from the very start.

Jesus has given us everything we need to live the resurrection life: faith, hope, peace, unity in heart and mind, abundant life, and above all, love. All this is gifted to us from God, through the Risen Christ.

And now, on this Day of Pentecost, God provides us one more gift to enable and empower us to live the resurrection life: The gift of the Holy Spirit, who sets us free. This is what we celebrate at Pentecost.

We have two scripture lessons this morning that are set in two closed-off rooms:

- The first is the room where the disciples took refuge in the days after the Crucifixion. They had locked the doors because they feared the same religious leaders who killed Jesus would be coming after them next.
- The second is a house—perhaps the same one, perhaps another—also in Jerusalem. The time is 40 days after the Resurrection. The disciples had been meeting in this house for over a week, ever since the day they went out to the Mount of Olives where they watched Jesus ascend into heaven.

Two rooms, same folks, seven weeks apart. Two accounts of how the Holy Spirit was given to the followers of Jesus. I know the second account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the one from Chapter 2 of Acts, is far more familiar to us.

- The house the disciples are in is filled with a sound like the rushing wind.
- Tongues that look like flames appear above the disciples as they are overwhelmed by the Spirit.
- They speak in many languages, the languages of pilgrims from faraway lands gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.
- Peter gets up and speaks about this outpouring of God’s Spirit.
- He speaks about how it fulfills the words of the prophet: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).
- And he speaks about how it offers salvation to all who repent and believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Savior sent by God.
- 3,000 people came to believe that day.

This is an evocative account of God’s power to save. The emphasis here is on the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel. In Luke, Jesus told his followers: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). What better moment for the Spirit to come than on Pentecost, a time when “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) were in Jerusalem for the festival. The message is clear: The Gospel is universal; it is good news for all the people.

- No matter where they are from.
- No matter what language they speak.
- No matter the color of their skin or the size of their pocketbook, all are welcome to share in the love of God through Jesus Christ.

We know the story from Acts better than the one from John. But this year, I’m thinking more about John’s version and how it speaks to us in our current time of global and national dis-eases.

In the Gospel of John, the focus is more selective. John stresses the identity of the community as those called by Jesus to go into the world to share the Gospel.¹ “You did not choose me,” Jesus said, “but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...” (John 15:16).

- It was Easter Sunday. The doors to the room they were in were locked. The disciples were afraid of what lay on the other side of the door.
- But locked doors cannot keep Jesus out. Jesus appears among them inside that locked room. Through the barricaded door, through the walls of anxiety and fear, through and through, Jesus came to them and said: “Peace be with you.”

Peace. I’m sure that was a welcome word when the disciples heard it. Maybe they thought they could just kick back and relax. Maybe they said to themselves, “Jesus is here, now we will be safe. We’re all together again, right here in this room. No need to worry. We have our locks, our door, our walls, and we have Jesus.” But the peace Jesus brought did not mean they could stay in that room.

- Jesus says to them: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
- They cannot stay. They cannot rely on the safety of their fortified room. They must go because Jesus sends them into the world.

Next, Jesus fulfills the promise he made before he died. Without missing a beat, Jesus opened his mouth... He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This Spirit is the breath of life. This is what makes the Church the Church—the very Spirit of Jesus is given to us. Jesus lives in and through us.

“I have been crucified with Christ,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19-20).

This the only way we can understand being the Body of Christ in the world. The Spirit of Jesus lives in us. The Spirit of Jesus gives the Body, the Church, the very life of Christ.

Finally, Jesus gives the disciples the power of the Holy Spirit:

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22-23).

Jesus breathed on them and gave them the breath of life. Jesus breathed on them and gave them the power to forgive. Jesus set his disciples free from their fears and gave them the power to set others free by forgiving sins.² One of my devotional readings from last week really captured the difference this made for the disciples of Jesus, and I want to share it with you:

What a transformation—from a sense of total powerlessness to having the ability to forgive sins! As God’s breath creates and recreates, Jesus’ breath grants the power of the Holy Spirit. Through breath and through the Trinity, we—like the disciples—are empowered to break out of the prisons we have allowed our fear to build around us. Our faith can transform our fear into power.³

Jesus showed up and breathed new life, the life of the Spirit, into the disciples. We carry that breath, that Spirit, with us today.

Breathing is on our hearts in a couple of other ways right now.

For one, it’s hard to read these words and not be reminded that we are holed up in our homes, anxious about the air we breathe when we go out in crowds. We are reminded of the virus that keeps us apart, for ours and each other’s safety. When we go out, we wear a mask to reduce the risk of spreading a serious, and potentially deadly, disease. For the moment, we don’t want to breathe on anyone else, or have them breathe on us.

The graphic I’m using for today’s service reminds us of this. I’m grateful to Rev. Chris Suerdieck, who has substituted for me several times; you all know her—this is her original artwork. It shows masked disciples who, nonetheless, receive the Holy Spirit.

¹ Matt Skinner, “Commentary on John 20:19-23,” Working Preacher.com, article on internet, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4465, accessed 26 May 2020.

² Skinner, “Commentary on John 20:19-23.”

³ Eric H.F. Law, “Spirit and Breath of Power,” in *Disciplines, A Book of Daily Devotions, 2020*, (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Press, 2019), 187.

A pandemic does not stop the work of the Holy Spirit; but it does require that we change the way we do things in order to safeguard one another's health. We will not remain behind our doors in fear forever. We are already finding new ways to worship and to do ministry in this time, and we will continue to do so until it is safe to return to some of the patterns of work and worship we were used to.

This will not last forever. This, too, shall pass. But, for now, we must be safe.

Beloved, we speak often of how the Holy Spirit is a comforter and guide for us. But the Spirit can also be a holy dis-comforter in a time of injustice. This past week I have found myself dis-comforted by the Spirit. We heard the words of the Gospel: "Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Last week, we heard other words: "I can't breathe." These were some of the last words uttered by George Floyd, an African-American man who was cruelly suffocated to death by a police officer in Minneapolis. Since then:

- One of the police officers involved has been arrested and charged with murder, and rightly so. I don't think I've ever seen a more blatant use of excessive force before.
- Protests, some of them violent, have taken place in Minneapolis and dozens of cities across the nation.

None of the violence in this case is justified.

- Not the violence of some protestors—and please note, it is not all protestors...the vast majority of them are peaceful.
- And not the violence done to George Floyd by these police officers—and note here, it is not all police who are brutal...the majority of police are doing their best to protect the public.

But it is the first violence, the violence done to George Floyd by the police, that has dis-comforted a nation.

And rightly so.

- There is justifiable anger, heartbreak, and frustration for the Floyd family and for our African-American brothers and sisters who must live the reality of discrimination and racism every day of their lives.
- There is justifiable anger and frustration that racial minorities have not, and do not, have the same opportunities in this country as Whites.
- There is justifiable anger and frustration that George Floyd is only the latest name in a long list of African Americans who have been killed by police.
- And there is justifiable anger that their cries for equal treatment and reforms of our criminal justice system have gone unanswered.

I am dis-comforted, by the events of this week, and by the inequality that remains widespread in our society.

And I hope you are too. But we must not despair.

- This morning, let us have hope because Jesus comes into our locked rooms and takes away our fears.
- This morning, let us have hope because Jesus sends us into the world to be people who seek justice and equality for all people.
- This morning, let us have hope that a nation in pain over centuries of racial discrimination can take a step toward the light of genuine equality.

There is a holy dis-comfort in the land. As God's people, we must pray for the courage, the strength, and the Spirit to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God through this time of racial inequality, into God's future where all races, nations, and peoples are equally valued, equally cherished, equally loved.

There are signs of hope that this may be.

We saw the news reports focused on violence this last week. What they didn't show us were the places where protestors and police worked together. The result was peaceful demonstrations.

- That was the case in Flint, Michigan, where a county sheriff at one point took off his helmet, put down his baton, told his officers to put down their batons, and he, and they, walked humbly with the crowd...acknowledging their pain, and acknowledging the need for something good to emerge out of this national pain.

This is the way to the Promised Land. This is the way to Reconciliation. There is hard work ahead for us as a nation, and as a Church. Let this Pentecost moment not be lost for us. May God transform our fears so that we can be a healing and reconciling people. Now and always. Amen.