

Second Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2009
John 20: 19-31

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do. Amen.

If you turn to the first page of my favorite novel (A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving) you are greeted with the following quote from Frederick Buechner:

“Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of experience a genuine, self authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

I think most of us in this sanctuary this morning can identify with Buechner and with Thomas, the disciple who, along with the Risen Jesus, shares center stage in today's Gospel.

We probably came to church this morning with some doubts. We will probably leave here with them too. We will take these doubts with us to work, to school, to a friend's house. Basically where we go, so will our doubts go also. We doubt if we are the right one for the job, or if we are prepared for our test, if our friends like us for who we really are.

Like the disciples in today's story, we may doubt if we are really safe. We may doubt if all we believe is really true. We may doubt whether God's plan for the universe is sound; whether love *will* ultimately triumph over hate; whether light *will* triumph over darkness; whether, as promised, we will *ever* encounter the Risen Christ.

I don't want to say our doubts identify us, but they certainly constitute part of who we are – they result from past experiences, encounters and relationships. They are often amplified by our pride and jealousy. I can sympathize with Buechner's statement: “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

And I believe doubt grows, or at least is most apparent, in an environment of fear.

It was fear that had the disciples behind closed doors. It was fear that kept them inside, locked away from the rest of the community. Mary Magdalene had told them that she had encountered Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, but the disciples were still full of fear and doubt.

And into this context of fear comes the Risen Lord.

He greets them: “Peace be with you.”

He shows them his hands and his side. Signs of fear realized. Signs of fear transformed.

He says again: “Peace be with you.”

The disciples had to remember what Jesus had said to them just a short while ago: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

He had said this during his farewell discourse, right after promising the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of an advocate, sent by God the Father.

"My peace I give to you."

Now, back with his disciples again following his death and resurrection, Jesus greets them with these familiar words of peace. And here, in this room, in the house with locked doors, amidst the fear and doubt, Jesus breathes on the disciples and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit. He breathes on them, gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he sends them forth to do God's work in the world.

What a powerful image: the breath of God – gently nudging us forth into the world, to do God's work and to be Christ for others. It is a wonderful image, but it is not the end of the story.

For we hear that the disciples are in the house again a week later.

And AGAIN they are behind closed doors.

This time Thomas is with them. Thomas - the doubter. Poor Thomas! I think history has done him a disservice. He gets singled out for having doubts - as if none of the other disciples ever did. As if his doubts were somehow more noteworthy than the doubts of those who had ALREADY seen the Risen Lord.

And if the disciples, who saw Jesus risen from the dead, were still afraid, still filled with doubts, what does that mean for us, who didn't see the Risen Lord in the days following his death, who were not, like Thomas, invited to thrust (not simply touch) our fingers into his wounds?

It means we are no different than those faithful people who began the church 2000 years ago. We are in the same place as they were and we act in similar - very human – ways. We want to see and touch and feel our way out of what are often the terribly intangible walls of fear we construct around us.

In the days following his death and resurrection, Jesus came to his disciples and offered himself to them over and over again.

See my wounds. Cast your hands into my side. I know I was here just last week. But I will keep coming to you until you believe.

In the same way, Jesus comes to us – his doubting, fearful followers and offers himself to us over and over again (Gail R. O' Day in Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 2 p 403).

Today, this very morning, Jesus comes and greets us with a word of peace. How will we recognize the greeting? Will we turn toward Christ, toward the one drawing close to us? Will we recognize his breath? Will we breathe in his peace? Will we take the Risen Christ into ourselves?

A story for those of you who may think I am getting too mystical in the pulpit:

I imagine many of you who had better science classes growing up (I believe this will probably be the majority of you!), have already heard of the Caesar's breath phenomenon, and heard of it long before I

did. It is evidently a teaching tool used in science classes around the world. I only learned about it recently – probably through a story like this one which aired on NPR a few years ago on Caesar's 2050th birthday:

When Caesar exhaled for the last time, he released an enormous number of "breath" molecules, mostly nitrogen and carbon dioxide. This number of molecules is very very large – it is – in Gospel terms - exceedingly great!

By one MIT professor's calculation the number is: $.05 \times 6 \times 10$ to the 23rd. 10 to the 23rd alone looks ridiculous. It is a 10 followed by 22 zeros.

The NPR reporter said that "over the years, a number of scholars have tried to figure out what typically would happen to all those molecules. They figured some were absorbed by plants, some by animals, some by water -- and a large portion would float free and spread themselves all around the globe in a pattern so predictable that (this is the fun part) if you take a deep breath right now, at least one of the molecules entering your lungs literally came from Caesar's last breath." (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5280420>)

What does this have to do with us today?

Well, for one, that breath you just took included molecules that not only Caesar - but Jesus himself - once breathed.

It is pretty cool to think about, but I mean to convey more than a neat piece of trivia to share at your next party.

I think it is important for us all to ponder this breath, because through it we share in Christ's new life.

Throughout Scripture breath is life.

Listen to the stories. Read them again.

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

We read that in Genesis.

And then in that wonderful story from Ezekiel which we just heard at the Easter Vigil:

And as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived...

Breath is life.

Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives to them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He shares his new life with them. All the glory of the resurrection is captured in a simple breath – tangible, bodily - breath. The disciples get it. They receive the Spirit.

Yet, still they doubt. Still they are afraid.

And so Jesus comes again.

“Peace be with you.”

We will soon greet each other with this sign.

When we do so, we will, as Christ did, greet someone who has doubts (for we all have doubts!) You will turn to your neighbor in the pew, and filled with the very breath of Christ, you will turn to that sister or brother and be Christ for them. You will meet their doubt with the words of Christ.

“Peace be with you.”

In this church the exchange of the peace is often a boisterous affair. I’m sure it will be today as well – especially at 10:30.

But today as you reach for the hand of the person nearby, know you are greeting another person who has doubts just like you and who Jesus comes to over and over again, just as he comes to you.

Perhaps Jesus will come in the greeting of Peace you extend in His name. Perhaps.

Let us pray:

Breathe on us, breath of God,
Fill us with life anew,
That we may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Amen.