

Lion's Breath
John 20:19-23
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John's Gospel this morning tells us that when Jesus appeared to his disciples that first Easter morning, he breathed on them. And as the story begins, you might say that the disciples themselves are out of breath. When something disheartening happens in your family or among friends, what do we compare it to? Having the air sucked out of the room. And the disciples are sitting together that first evening, their hearts are sunk, their disposition downcast, the shades are pulled, the dishes are piled high in the sink, the gloom is so thick you could cut it with a knife. When suddenly everything changes.

Let's look at that scene from John's gospel chapter 20 beginning at verse 19. And as you are able, out of reverence for the authority and inspiration of God's word, let's stand together and listen to the word of the Lord.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

In CS Lewis' Narnia tale *The Silver Chair*, little Jill is only ten years old, but the fate of Narnia rests on her shoulders. You see, the wicked queen of the underworld has abducted Prince Rilian, who is the rightful heir to the throne, and has him under the spell of her deadly green powder. Now the queen not only has an arsenal of magic, she also lives underground in total darkness in a castle that is surrounded by evil giants. So this little English schoolgirl is given an impossible mission. Ah, but Aslan, the great Lion, takes Jill to the top of a high mountain and stands her next to the cliff and blows on her. And such is the power of Lion's breath that it picks Jill up and blows her to Narnia. And when she arrives there, not only has she ridden on Lion's breath, but she has Lion's breath in her lungs. Man, when you have Lion's breath in you, nothing can stop you. So Jill rescues Prince Rilian, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Now you might think that this is just a nice fairy tale, but oh no, this is actually CS Lewis' allegory for the real life event of what we just read. Jesus sent his disciples into the world to perform miracles, to heal and teach and cast out demons. Simply by telling this story, they were to go out and replace Christian faith for paganism as the basis of a whole new civilization. The ones he uses to do this are these 11 people. Eleven people. Look around you – there at least 6 or 7 times that number of people here with us this morning. And yet that's all it took for the gospel to literally change history.

And you know what? They did it. We might ask, how in the world could something like this happen? Maybe they made use of the most effective social media campaign of their day (Facescroll), maybe they did a great job marketing their pastor, maybe they had the acres of free parking and really clear signage for their facility. But none of those things are what did it. The followers of Jesus were able to turn the world upside down because they had the breath of the Lion.

Now, you and I can't go more than a moment or two without breath. I heard of someone once asking a 103 year old woman what the key to living so long was. And she said, "Just keep on breathin' sonny." In the very beginning, God breathed existence into Adam, and ever since then shortness of breath sends us to the emergency room. If you've ever run or exercised in any way, you know that training often includes the self-inflicted form of torture called oxygen deprivation. We need breath, and without it we die.

But even more important than air is our need for God. We need Jesus. And I want to say that the Lion is here in this room. He left his throne, became flesh, and now is here with us in the form of breath.

When Jesus joined his disciples in that locked room that first Easter, that was the first thing we see he offers his followers. The first gift he offers when he breathes on them is his presence. Jesus tells his disciples: "Listen, I want to be as near to you as the very breath in your lungs." That, I think, truly represents the Christian life. They didn't run through the streets yelling, "We get to live forever, we get to live forever." They exclaimed, "Jesus is alive, and we never have to be without him ever again."

When Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't shoot up into heaven like a Roman Candle. He actually doubled back and picked up right where he left off in conversation with his followers. And in that moment, he told them, "I am going to be closer to you than I ever have been before."

You see, Easter is not just a Creed, it's not just a concept. But Easter is the very presence of Christ always with us. It's like always having the person in your life who knows your hopes, thinks your jokes are funny, who you can say, "Which one of us doesn't like broccoli?", who finishes your sentences even before you can think of your response. This is what the presence of the Spirit is like, and if you have this in your life, then you'll have what the text says is the next gift Jesus offers, and that is peace.

"Peace be with you, my peace I give to you." Three times Jesus says this to his disciples, twice in our passage today and one in the next passage that was read last week. One of the ways that we calm ourselves in tense situations is simply to take a deep breath. In the moments before I perform a wedding here, I have a little ritual that takes place right behind that door over there. I have a little prayer with the groom, and then I have him take a deep breath and now blow it out. Then I say, "Do you know what that is? That is the last bit of free air you'll ever breathe."

When Jesus walks into that room that day, something amazing happened. Not only did Jesus overcome death, but he gave purpose and meaning to our passing. You know, sometimes people like to paint a rosy picture of death. Oh, you just go back into the ground and become food for generations to come. Bogus, I don't want that. If that's all it is, I am profoundly fearful of death. If going back into the ground is all there is, then there is no joy in it all.

What is joy? Joy is being with the people you love. Being with the family and friends who give your life its richness. Brene Brown, a popular sociologist and researcher from the University of Houston, starts a lecture this way. She says: "It's Christmas Eve, camera shows a family in the car on their way to dinner at grandma's house. They're all singing jubilantly to the tune of Jingle Bells. Slowly the camera focuses in on every member's face. What happens next?" 60% of people polled said, what? Car crash. She calls this foreboding joy. The more you step into joy, the more you risk the possibility of loss, the more vulnerable we become. Having kids has been like this for me. Anytime my kids are away from me, it is like my heart is going on outside my body. And that's why this Easter season is so great. Because here you have the experience of loss, followed by the surprising joy that death is not the last word. When we die, that's only the beginning.

But like I said, just making it through life so we can get to heaven is not the fullness of the story. In verse 21, Jesus says to the disciples, "I give you this peace, and as the Father sent me, now I'm sending you." I think these are some of the most important words in all of scripture. "So I send you." The third thing Jesus offers us is purpose. He says "go put Hell out of business." Because we have peace that allows us to no longer fear death, we are set free and sent out to love without hesitation or reservation.

One person said that living the Christian life is like skydiving into the eye of a hurricane. You know that in the eye of a hurricane, there is an eerie calm. And our lives can become so chaotic that it feels like a storm. But with Christ at the center of our lives, mysteriously there is calm. But what happens just as soon as we experience that calm? We're swept up into God's grand purpose and flung out into the world to love recklessly.

What is your purpose? What is God inviting you in close to tell you is your calling? Every one of us has it, and at the risk of offending those of us who have families, I want to remind you that it's not only to love and take care of our families. After all, Jesus reminded his disciples that the kingdom of God is even greater and more precious than even our families. But when families and churches are joined in this amazing and joyful ride, we are set free from fear and given the amazing purpose of loving others full tilt the way God did when he sent his son into the world. That's our purpose: to be people and a church for others. I've said it before and I'll say it even more emphatically now, William Temple once said, the church does not exist for those who are inside it. Look around, the people who are around you these are not your mission field, these are your co-workers. Because the church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not members.

And to do that, to bind up broken hearted, to cast out demons, to pick up and travel to Ghana West Africa, or to pick up and travel next door to your neighbor who you know nothing about takes a little something extra. It takes, finally, power, nourishment, strength. Not of our own, but from that breath of the Lion, who breathes his spirit over the meal we will share in just a moment. Jesus never asked us to go out on an empty stomach. The miracle of this table is that when we gather in just a moment with every morsel of bread and drop of juice, Jesus Christ is filling and preparing you, he is inviting you in to send you out to be his ambassadors of grace and mercy and love. Amen.