

A Breath of Fresh Air

John 20:19-31

Home Moravian Church, April 27, 2025

I'll bet it was hot in that room—hot and stuffy, with the door locked. How many were in there? Jesus had many followers besides the twelve, who were now eleven, including a lot of women. They must have all been looking for a safe place after his crucifixion.

“But Thomas,” we learn, “was not with them.” Where was he? Too afraid even to join them behind locked doors? Had he already foresworn their leader? Or was he wrestling with his feelings, not sure what to believe? Or maybe he was on his way: moving from hiding place to hiding place, tiptoeing when he had to, running when he could, trying to make it to the group.

But they couldn't wait for him. They locked the door, and barricaded themselves in that airless space, where they took shallow, frightened breaths and waited to see what would happen. The fear alone ate up most of the oxygen.

Then Jesus came and stood among them. That's how John tells it: He wasn't there, and then he was. The story proceeds, step by step: “He said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

Then the disciples rejoiced? Why didn't they rejoice as soon as they saw him? But remember: In this gospel, Mary didn't immediately recognize the resurrected Jesus, either. If we follow the steps in the story, it seems the disciples didn't really “see” Jesus until he showed them his hands and his side.

Then “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained.””

He breathed on them. He *breathed!* Jesus, three days dead in the tomb, was among them, talking and *breathing*. It was amazing—even though the last thing anyone needed, in this tight space, was another human exhaling carbon dioxide. But maybe the resurrected Christ was breathing out something that *gave* life, rather than crowding it out of the room. It’s almost as though he were breathing out oxygen. Or we could just call it “spirit.”

Spirit. In the opening words of the Bible, *spirit* hovered over the face of the deep. Since the Hebrew word “ruach” means both “spirit” and “wind,” some translations say it was “a wind sweeping over the waters.” Can you feel it? The spirit is a breeze in your face, bringing freshness and the scent of water. Just what you need when it seems the air has gone out of the room, or out of your life.

Breathing into that closed, fearful space, Jesus brought life to the disciples. They needed it—not just to relieve their fear, but to fortify them for mission. As Jesus said before he breathed: He was sending them.

But sending them to do what? There are no instructions, as in Matthew, to “go and make disciples.” There are no instructions, as in Luke, to stay in Jerusalem and wait. There are no weird, tacked-on endings, as in Mark, about taking up snakes and drinking poison. Just this: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Maybe their mission is forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit gives power to forgive.

We know that the Holy Spirit helps us do what we can’t do on our own. Just last Sunday at dawn, we stood outside this church and repeated these words borrowed from Martin Luther:

“We cannot by our own reason and strength believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Ghost has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified and kept us in the true faith.” Even to *believe* is impossible without the Holy Spirit, which blows into Christ’s embrace like a wind across the waters.

The Holy Spirit gives us power to believe. Today’s text suggests that the Holy Spirit also gives us power to forgive.

Does the Holy Spirit give us power to *forgive people for not believing*?

I keep thinking about Thomas. Poor old Thomas. In the Bible, he has a nickname, “the Twin”; but we’ve given him a label, “Doubting Thomas.” We’ve turned the label into a scolding: *Don’t be a Doubting Thomas!* Even though Thomas wanted nothing more than what the other disciples got: a look at Jesus’ wounds. Even though the other disciples *also* needed to see Jesus’ wounds before they rejoiced in seeing Jesus.

When Thomas refused to believe what the other disciples told him, how did those disciples feel? Having already seen Jesus’ wounds, they had already come to believe. Did they make their believing a trophy? A weapon? Did they scoff when Thomas said he needed to touch Jesus with his own hands? Did they judge him harshly because he asked questions? Were they angry with him because he wasn’t with them in that locked room, and did they take it out on him by criticizing his attempt to find out the truth for himself?

Or did they remember their own fear, their own questions, their own joy at recognizing Jesus? Did they let the Holy Spirit work through them like a breath of fresh air, giving them the power to forgive Thomas for not being any more ready than they had been to believe in the impossible?

If the Holy Spirit gives the power to forgive, we might start by forgiving Thomas—especially the Thomas inside ourselves. The one who asks hard questions and insists on his own experience of Christ. The one who needs time and personal connection with the risen Christ before he can *become believing*. That’s more or less what Jesus says in the Greek: something like, “Don’t be becoming unbelieving, but be becoming believing.” *Becoming believing* is ongoing. So maybe we should be gentle with the Thomas locked up inside ourselves, and forgive him for his uncertainty, and let a little oxygen into that room.

We might know a lot of other Thomases. They might struggle visibly with believing, or challenge our ideas, or even prefer uncertainty. Where does the Holy Spirit lead us in our relationship with these Thomases, many of whom are our family and friends? We could take a tip from another Thomas, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who said that faith “is a judgment that is fully and deliberately taken in the light of a truth that cannot be proven—it is not merely the acceptance of a decision that has been made by somebody else.”¹ Thomas the Twin did not accept a decision made by the other disciples. He valued his own relationship with Jesus too much for that.

I hope the Holy Spirit gave the other disciples the power to forgive Thomas for seeking his own path to *becoming believing*. It seems, from the text, that forgiveness was a mission on which the disciples were sent.

What if they didn’t forgive him? “If you forgive the sins of any,” Jesus says, “they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We could argue that Jesus gave the

¹ Quoted by William Irwin, “God Is a Question, Not an Answer,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2016 (<https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/26/god-is-a-question-not-an-answer/?smid=tw-share>)

disciples power to initiate *God's* forgiveness, or not. That's a traditional reading on which the Catholic church bases the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, as offered by a priest.

On the other hand, I notice that this sentence names only one actor: "You." The words on the page do not involve God. But the words make it clear that if the disciples forgive the sins of any, the sins are forgiven *by the disciples*. And if the disciples retain the sins of any, the sins are retained *by the disciples*. The same is true for us: If we forgive our brothers and sisters, our brothers and sisters are forgiven *by us*. If we retain the sins of our brothers and sisters, those sins are retained *by us*—meaning that we will walk around with their sins on our shoulders, just as burdened as our brothers and sisters are.

We don't know what Thomas was doing on the day the risen Christ first appeared. We don't know what kept him out of that room, or how hard he might have been working to find his way in. Maybe he showed up just a moment too late, just after the other disciples locked the doors.

We also don't know how the disciples felt when Thomas did show up and then refused to accept their decision about Jesus as his own. Were they angry? After all, it was *their* word that he doubted. Or did they construe his struggle of faith as wrong, or even sinful? And if so: How long did they hold onto that burden? When did they take a deep breath, and remember that they had received the Holy Spirit, and relax and let some oxygen into the room?

Sometimes when we're challenged by another's religious ideas, or struggles of faith, or decisions they make that are not the same as ours, we lock ourselves into a space where anxiety and fear consume all the oxygen. Who is standing outside the doors today, wrestling with their feelings, trying to decide what to believe? Whose challenges are making us so defensive and

afraid that we fortify our doors, locking them out as we lock ourselves in—and discovering that it's the inside space that's airless?

Yet, like those first disciples, we have been breathed on by the living Christ. We have received the Holy Spirit like a breath of fresh air—like oxygen, bringing life back into the room. We're fortified for mission. The mission includes forgiveness.

If we can forgive the Thomas inside ourselves, and all the Thomases who might have offended or challenged us in our belief, then we can open ourselves to real conversations with people who desire God just as deeply but may see things differently. Those conversations can be Holy Spirit moments, full of forgiveness and grace and the freshness of a wind sweeping over the water.

When we unlock the door, the holy wind blows everyone into Christ's embrace.

Amen.