

Breathing Peace

[John 20:19-31](#)

Names are interesting things. In our families or social circles we give each other nicknames and sometimes they stick. I am called Caro because when I was a social worker we had a chalkboard on which we wrote when we were next expecting to be in the office. All the others had short names like Ken, Ann, Mary and so there just wasn't room for Caroline, so it was abbreviated to Caro and for a joke they started calling me Caro and then it stuck. When I lived in community there was already a Caroline so I kept the Caro. That's a pretty benign naming story but I am sure you can think of people whose family have given them odd names like Peanut which may have been charming at 6 weeks but at 65 are just plain strange.

This morning's story is about Doubting Thomas, not Tom, not just Thomas, but doubting Thomas. Whenever we think of Thomas we think "Doubting Thomas" but I wonder if that's really fair. For some reason he wasn't there when all the others had this wonderful experience of Jesus, he wasn't there when Jesus breathed on them and said, "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." That was a pretty big event to miss out on. We don't know why he wasn't there, perhaps he didn't get the message or perhaps he was tired or perhaps he was helping someone out. We can let our imaginations run wild, because we just don't know.

Yet Thomas hung in with the group. He had missed out on a major event. He missed seeing Jesus and there was no guarantee that he ever would. And it seemed so unlikely. So he was skeptical. But he stayed. Thomas was faithful. Even when his faith in the resurrection was lagging behind others people's. Even when he was out of the loop. Even when it really wasn't fun anymore, he stayed.

Many of us have experiences a bit like Thomas's with church. We are going through a dry spell when it feels like communion is just a dry wafer and a sip of cheap port, or in this forty day sojourn, a virtual dry wafer and an imaginary sip of cheap port; we are going through a dry spell and it just doesn't seem worth showing up. Why bother? Or we were enthusiastic about a project or a group and now everyone else is heading in a different direction and it isn't what we wanted or expected, so why waste the time? In the midst of other people's experiences of community, other people's experiences of resurrection we can feel like the only sceptic, the heretic in the crowd.

But there was a reason that God called us to this faith community. There was something that we found here. There was something we had to offer. During times of dis-connect, Faithful Thomas offers us an example of someone who hung in. Someone who waited through the discomfort and the sense of isolation or of differentness. Someone who stayed faithful even when his vision was restricted.

Let's look for a moment at what Thomas missed.

Jesus came and stood among them and 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. 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."

Peace be with you. This is Jesus' post-resurrection greeting. Every time he shows up he says "peace be with you". In this time of uncertainty and sometimes fear, in this time when any stranger might give us a deadly infection, when the news doesn't get better, when the time until we can again rejoice in person with our loved ones gets longer, we need that peace. I have shared with you before about how important the serenity prayer has become in my life. It is important because it helps to give me that peace that Jesus brings, the peace that passes understanding. And that is what our world needs right now. We need the bringers of peace. I am reminded of the prophecy in Isaiah,

"How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who proclaims peace,
Who brings glad tidings of good things." (Is 52:7)

That my friends, is our job; to re-connect again and again with the risen Christ, to hear his words, "Peace be with you." and to take them into our hearts. Jesus says to us, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathes on us and says to us, "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."

How intimate. You have to be closer than 6 feet for someone to breathe on you. You have to be even closer to feel their breath. Let us close our eyes for just a moment and allow ourselves to open to the peace of God in our hearts...

As we do so let us feel our oneness with each other in the Body of Christ. Let this Body of Christ assembled, breathe in the peace of God...

Breathe in the breath of Jesus, and breathe out – let go - the anxiety of the world...

Breathe peace...

That is the great antidote. Breathing the peace of God, becoming the peace of God. Receiving the Holy Spirit and forgiving.

Forgiving. When we hold our vision of a person in a particular frame then we are retaining their sins. There is a man in town who owes Jill \$25. My mental name for him is "Owes Jill \$25". I am retaining his sin. I know nothing about him. I don't know his given name, I don't know what his family calls him. I don't know what or whom he loves. I have just one way of thinking about him "Owes Jill \$25". Jill has long ago forgotten about that \$25 but somehow I retain it. I retain his debt in my mind and so I am affected by it.

As we think of people at this time when we don't get much direct contact we may hold similar snapshots, and because we are emotional people, our snapshots are often of times when there was an

emotional charge. And that's not always pretty. Forgiveness means letting go of the negative images and allowing God's Spirit to gently remind us that everyone is a beloved child of God. Even those who set policies we don't agree with. Even those whose behavior is bizarre. Even those who let us down.

Breathing God's peace means letting go of those negative snapshots and replacing them with peace-filled images. Letting go of judgmental names and replacing them with loving ones. Replacing "Doubting Thomas" with "Faithful Thomas". In the places of judgement and fear in our minds and on social media, let us sow peace.

*My God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change
The courage to change the things we can
And the wisdom to know the difference.*