

April 16, 2023
Second Sunday of Easter
Holy Humor Sunday

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship 1 Peter 1:3

By God's great mercy,

**we have been born anew to a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.**

*Hymn 238 Thine Is the Glory

Prayer

**Living God, for whom no door is closed,
no heart is locked,
draw us beyond our doubts,
til we see your Christ
and touch his wounds
where they appear in others.
This we ask through Christ our Savior,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen.**

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God's mercies are from everlasting to everlasting. They are new every morning and sure as the sunrise. Know you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

First Reading John 20:19-25

Time With Our Young Disciples

Second Reading John 20:26-31

The Morning Message

Let's set the scene: the disciples had gathered in a familiar meeting place, very likely the upper room where they had observed the Passover meal and the room in which Jesus instituted the Last

Supper. The room was locked up tight for fear of the Jewish authorities. Any footfall upon the stair, a knock, or command to open the door, could signal certain death for them.

Then suddenly, Jesus is there with them. He gave them the customary eastern greeting, “Peace be to you.” A more accurate translation would be, “May God give you every good thing.”

We can imagine both the shock and the profound peace that would wash over the disciples in that moment. Jesus must have anticipated their need to see for themselves that this man was truly their friend, the crucified one, Jesus.

He shows them his wounds, his hands and his side. He lets them touch his body. Note, this is the same gesture Jesus will make for Thomas, but we never call these disciples doubters. Just an observation.

And then Jesus commissions them for their life’s work, their magnum opus.
“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Let’s place ourselves in that room: dark and stuffy, with the curtain covering the only window, everyone still as a stone, the snapping electricity of fear running through all of them.

Rev. Marci Auld Glass writes that , “Jesus could have gone and sent other people, presumably people with more courage, people who weren’t hiding, or whomever. But, he’s sending his people. His friends. His disciples. The one who denied him three times in eight hours. The ones who loved him til the end. Even Thomas, who isn’t there at the moment, but who will get his chance in a bit.”

This is great good news for us. These two thousand years later, we are called and sent, even with our human inadequacies and our brokenness. No research project, no finals, no certification test, no bar exam, no ordination exam required. Belief. Even shaky, “I’ll believe it when I see it” faith. That is qualification enough to bear the good news of the gospel into the world. Yes!

On the other hand, I’m not sure I want to sign up for the insults and abuse Jesus suffered. But don’t we already know that the gospel doesn’t always take us down easy paths?

But, hang on. Here comes help: After Jesus gives the faithful their instructions, he breathes on them. Two years of Covid precautions has me concerned about having someone breathe on me intentionally. But, that was the method. Jesus breathed.

The Greek word for breath is “pneuma.” In Latin, it comes to us as “Spiritus.” You can see the relatedness of breath and spirit-without breath, we have no life, no spirit. What is the first thing

every mother wants to hear the moment her baby enters the world? Her baby's cry. That is the sign that air is filling the lungs, the heart is beating and blood is circulating through the newborn body as it should.

"The risen Christ breathes, filling the disciples with his quickening, life-giving Spirit." And what is the Spirit? We will hear more about that on Pentecost Sunday, but, here's a start: "The Spirit is like wind, like fire, like a bird, like a breath-moving through every language and every culture of this world, bursting out of every category and defying every metaphor."

And it's a good thing because the first task Jesus assigns is this: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, then they are retained."

I confess, it's much easier to preach on the six verses at the end of this text- the ones about Doubting Thomas-than it is these curious words about forgiveness. But, let's try.

If you were to come talk to me about a situation that is troubling you, maybe a person who has hurt you, I would listen. I would ask if you are in danger. Then I would probably say something like, "The only person's behavior you can control is your own. You can't control anyone else. If you can't reconcile your issues, it's time to think of a way for you to make peace with this."

When we forgive people, we don't do it in the hope that they will change. Well, maybe sometimes we do. But, realistically, we forgive so that we are no longer holding onto the pain, the anger, the fear that can damage our lives. I've wasted time in my life perfecting my grudges. It's futile. It's a practice that can suck the breath, the spirit, right out of you. It has me.

Hear me clearly: there are some actions that wound in ways we identify as criminal in nature. In that case, we should reach out for help from the authorities. ASAP. A few years ago a pastor called me to report that a church member had entered a room of pre-schoolers at the church and threatened the teacher with a gun. What should they do? They don't want to offend the church member. She's very needy. She has a hard time getting along with people. Duh.

"Call the police. Now."

That made the pastor mad and then the session was mad and they stopped calling for help they wouldn't take.

I have referenced Rachel Held Evans several times in recent weeks. Rachel was raised in an evangelical Christian family. Her father was a pastor and professor at a Christian college in Tennessee. Her whole life and education was bathed in the climate of evangelical Christianity.

She was grateful for that foundation, but, as she moved into adulthood, experiencing life outside that sheltered environment, getting married, having children, she began to ask questions of her faith, she began raising questions about and to God. She wrote a blog. She wrote NYT best sellers. She was a much-sought-after preacher.

Rachel's books and blogs are rich and humorous and insightful. She can make you laugh til you cry. She can be blunt. She can make the pages just sing with warmth and beauty.

But, as she pushed the margins of her traditional faith, particularly the beliefs about women's roles in the church, she suffered terrible, hate-filled insults. Her church condemned her work. Friends fell away. But, she clearly felt the breath of God on her as she was making these changes. She was on that not-so-easy path many of us fear when saying yes to Jesus.

A few years ago, during an especially difficult time, Rachel took up a new practice for Lent. She turned her hate mail into Origami. This is what she said about it: "As much as I try to ignore the most vile of these messages, they can still be quite painful, and I think that's okay. It's important to grow thick skin, but I also want to keep a tender, open heart...which means unclenching my fists and letting some of these words hurt every now and again."

At the end of her Lenten journey, Rachel wrote: "What I learned, turning my hate mail into origami, is that we're meant to remake this world together. We're meant to hurt together, heal together, forgive together, and create together. And, in a sense, even the people who continue to hate me and call me names are a part of this beautiful process. Their words, carelessly spoken, spent the last 40 days in my home- getting creased and folded, worked over...stepped on by a toddler, read by my sister, stained with coffee...blacked out, thrown away, turned into poems, and folded into sailboats and cranes and pigeons that now sit smiling at me from my office window."

Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

I kinda doubt you and I have ever received the volume of hate mail Rachel Evans did.

But, I'd bet we could all name someone or something, that hurt us or made us miserable. And, this is saying the quiet part out loud... I have been known to hang onto nasty emails and memos and evaluations for a long time. I used to pull them out of file folders and stew over them, maybe shed a few tears and vow ...you get the drift.

But, praise God from whom all blessings flow...it doesn't last...when the risen Christ throws open the locked door of the heart, or the memory locked into the mind, and says, "Blow. Blow. Blow all of that stale, grudging, judging, lifeless air out.

And breathe."

*Hymn

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 606 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

We are so filled with the joy of the resurrection that we offer these gifts of our time, abilities, and treasure to you, O God. May they be signs of hope, peace, life, and community to all in need of your gifts and grace. In Jesus' name, who gave his life that we might live. Amen.

*Hymn 268 Crown Him With Many Crowns

*Blessing

The risen Christ says: Peace be with you.

May you be filled with all joy and hope in believing.

We have seen the Lord! Alleluia! Amen.

*Postlude