



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

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Sermon: "Deep Breath"

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John 20:19-31

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20:19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

20:24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

20:25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

20:26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

20:28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

20:29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

20:31 *But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

~

Take a breath.

Feel your lungs, your chest, your diaphragm, expand out and then retract.

Take a *deep* breath.

Feel the oxygen flowing up through your nostrils.

And the air blowing out of your mouth.

Close your eyes and take a slow breath in.

Ground yourself. Notice how just this simple act of breathing can calm you down, steady your nerves, recharge your senses.

Breathe...

Feel gratitude for this rhythmic, holy reminder that yes, you are alive.

Before we know anything else,
the sounds of names,
the shapes of our faces,
who our parents are,
the touch of another human being,
we know how to breathe...

Breathing is perhaps the most natural and complex thing we do as human beings.
No one teaches us how to do this. It is a gift of the Spirit.
In fact, for most of us, we don't ever think about it.
We don't wake up telling our lungs to get to work.
Most days, we may not realize we are breathing at all
Our bodies inhale and exhale for us – over and over again.
They miraculously know how to do it, even when we forget to.

But then again, there are those instances, when we *do* notice our breath.
And often that comes when - for some reason or another - we suddenly can't rely upon it.
Times when we are ill – and our organs don't function as they should.
Times when we have pushed our bodies too far – and we find ourselves gasping for air.
Times when we are afraid or upset – and our breath becomes short and choppy.

Times when something or someone blocks our airways, and prevents our bodies from doing what they know best.

It is in these times, when we notice the fragility and preciousness of this most reliable friend – when our breath, our most basic human right, is taken from us.

I can't breathe.

It is a cry that we have come to know all too well.
The plea of beloved black men being held to the ground by law enforcement.
In pain. Ignored. Discarded. Murdered.
Grown men pleading to do what they have known how to do since leaving the womb...
Breathe. Survive. Live.

I know many of us have been glued to the news this week and last, watching the trial of Officer Derek Chauvin unfold.
His was the knee that held down George Floyd to the pavement nearly a year ago – stopping his breathing - forever.
We all know the horror of those eight minutes and forty-six seconds.
We have seen it...
Over and over again George cries *I can't breathe*.
Over and over again, he says: "Please, stop." "Please, let me stand."
Over and over again, he tells his momma and his children. "I love you"
And finally, with the few breaths he has left he said, "I am dead."

The trial this week has been all about breath.
The prosecution and defense have asked:
When exactly did Mr. Floyd stop breathing?
Why? How? What was really the cause of his death?
Was it in fact homicide? Could it have been an overdose or due to a preexisting condition?
If he couldn't breathe, how then could he speak?

I don't know about you but this trial has felt retraumatizing.
Some of the arguments being presented have made my stomach turn.
Some of the angles feel like crude attempts to keep justice from rolling down.

A few days ago, Dr. Martin Tobin, a renowned pulmonary critical care doctor said George Floyd's preexisting conditions had nothing to do with his cause of death.
"A healthy person subjected to what Mr. Floyd was subject to, would have died."

He then pointed out a slow-motion video of Mr. Floyd. "Certainly, at the moment that you are speaking you are breathing," he continued, "But it doesn't tell you that you're going to be

breathing five seconds later. Here, you can see his eyes, he's conscience and then you see that he isn't. That is the moment when the life goes out of his body.”

Dr. Bill Smock, an emergency medicine physician testified: “I mean when you watch those videos - and we go through them – what is his respiration? He's breathing. He's talking. He's not snoring. He is saying, “please, please get off of me. I want to breathe. I can't breathe.’ That is not a fentanyl overdose. That is somebody begging to breathe.”¹

Try to take a breath. How do you feel now?

What emotions come up as you inhale....as you exhale...?

Take all the time you need. Be gentle with yourself. Take a deep breath.

The disciples in our story were nearly out of breath.
Their bodies were deemed dangerous by the State - and they were running for their lives.
They hid away in the house where they once met with their beloved teacher.
Now...Doors locked. Candles out.

Their feelings of fear and anxiety were raw and real.
Their world-shifting movement was suddenly over.
They were unable to wipe their leader's brutal crucifixion from their minds.
They were sure they were next.
How soon would the authorities find them? When would they come bust down the door?
How long would their torture last? Would anyone weep for their bodies?

We can imagine their anxiety. We can feel it in our bones, in our chests, in our bellies.
Their shortness of breath. Their shaky exhales. Their dizziness and nausea.
It was a frightening scene. A locked room devoid of hope or of peaceful resolution.

And then the impossible happens – a moment that changes everything.
Without warning – somehow, some way – the risen Christ enters the locked room.
God finds a way in.

(Sam inhales)

There they are, the disciples huddled together on a dirt floor, trembling in fear,
and before them stands Jesus. With punctured hand and side, he offers them exactly what they
hunger for, but can't imagine they will ever experience again - *peace*.

"Peace be with you." Jesus says.
After being subject to such wretched violence, Jesus comes bearing *peace*. *Why?*

Thomas isn't there that day, but his anxiety is no less acute. When his friends announce, "We have seen the Lord," he cannot get himself to breathe into the possibility that this can be true. He pushes back.

From where we sit, it is easy to judge doubting Thomas, but if we put ourselves in his shoes, we can understand his skepticism. His faith has been fractured, traumatized. He has just witnessed his friend breathe his last, seen 'the life' leave his body, so to hear "he is risen" feels like a cruel joke - a thought too miraculous to be true.

So, what does Jesus do then? He returns for Thomas. Appearing in that same locked room a week later, Jesus shares peace once again. And then as his friend has requested, Jesus offers his hands and his side. "Do not doubt, but believe." He says.

Take a breath.

These days, it feels like we have been holding our breath for so long...
After a year of pandemic, we have grown accustomed to living with these feelings of fear and disconnect.
We know what it's like to live with doors locked: unable to hug, to hold, to touch one another. When we gather, we do so at a distance, masked, and cautious.

Our lives feel so constricted and stifled now:
plans postponed, new protocols for school and work and church...
With the vaccine being rolled out at a faster rate, we want nothing more than to know when we might be able to return to life as it once was, we worry that things will ever be the same again.

Not only this, these days we are fearful if we can ever be able to mend the great divides between us, dismantle systems of white supremacy that infect us, learn to work hand in hand to heal our ailing planet Earth.

Constricted by our own fears, what do we need to believe in a Christ who stands before us?
What are we to make of this "peace" that the risen Jesus brings?

Recently, my interfaith family celebrated the Jewish holiday of Passover. It is time when we remember through food and storytelling when God freed the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt – and that "Charlton Heston" Moses led the enslaved Hebrews through the parted Red Sea toward the land of milk and honey.

The Hebrew word of Egypt is *Mitzrayim*. *Mitzrayim* can be translated to "the narrow place," or the "constricted place." In other words, as slaves in Egypt, our Biblical ancestors were living in constant fear for their lives: they could not serve God and one another in the ways they wished, they could not breathe deep.

In short, to be enslaved is to live a life that is constricted.
And it is not until the enslaved Hebrews are liberated - led out from the place of bondage into freedom - that they finally are able to breathe and live fully.

When Jesus stood before his disciples that fearful day, he did not offer words of peace alone. Jesus knew that the peace they needed was one that they could embody – experience, breathe into. With hands clenched and hearts racing, Jesus models his prayer for them. He breathes on the disciples. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” He says.

In this moment, the peace he brings, the breath he brings, serves as a reminder of what is already theirs to taste and see. God has freely given them everything they need to carry on. The Spirit is already at work in their bodies, in their breath, with them every step of the way. They need only notice this holy truth.

Breathe.....

By breathing deep, Jesus invites his disciples to ground themselves in all that they know to be true:

The first shall be last, the last shall be first...

Love your neighbor, love your enemy...

Blessed are the poor...

In my father's house there are many dwelling places...

Will you not stay awake with me?

Breathe...beloved...breathe.

Through breath, Jesus does not erase the troubles around them, but he does help his dear ones face their fears and reembrace who they are, and the sacred work they are called to do. His inspiration fills their lungs, comforts their nerves, recharges their bodies, and dares them to carry on despite the real and present danger.

It is a liberating breath:

“I am with you,” says their inhale.

“Be not afraid.” says their exhale.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus says.

And so too it is with us. All these years later...

In a time when the powers and principalities stifle and target those most impacted by white supremacy, leaving siblings in Christ vulnerable in our streets...

In a time where we remain constricted by our human fears,
keeping us from shifting systems that divide and harm one another...

Jesus' invitation to breathe is more important and stronger than ever.

When our instinct is to isolate ourselves behind locked doors,
God finds a way in and calls us out from the shadows to create innovative community.

Breathe...

When our instinct is to remain comfortable and safe,
God finds a way in and calls us to lean into discomfort and interrogate our own privilege.

Breathe...

When our instinct is to keep quiet and lay low,
God finds a way in and calls us to cry out where there is injustice and demand a more equitable world: a resurrection world where all can breathe in the sweet taste of liberation and breathe out a life now lived free from fear.

Breathe...

I don't remember a time when I felt more afraid.

It was the evening of January 9th and my contractions were becoming more frequent, more severe. Earlier that morning, I had been hiking mountains, watching movies, and kicking butt at Bananagrams. Now, I was leaned over a chair, moaning in discomfort.

My partner, Matt ushered me into the car and we drove to the hospital. The pain was so intense. My breath was short and quick. I could feel my throat closing in. Eyes welling with tears. Not another contraction. Please, not another one. In the hospital room, Matt held me close. We were both so frightened.

Suddenly, a doula came in with the speed and stride of Mary Poppins. I had never met her before. In fact, I didn't even know her name, or what she looked like beneath her mask. She placed her bag down. And rushed over to me. She put my head literally into her bosom and said, "OK breathe..."

This was the first time I really noticed my breath – the *power* of my breath. I stopped hoping the pain would subside, and instead, clung tight to the greatest tool I had. It had been there all along, present in the room, present in my body. All I needed to do was have someone help me recognize it, feel gratitude for it, use it to keep pushing forward.

Deep breath.....deep breath....no fear....trust....believe....breathe....

And eventually I would hear my son's breathing,
my son's crying - new life, taking its first breath.

(Sam inhales and exhales)

Siblings in Christ, we live in a world where too many lives are constricted, trampled on, silenced, cruelly stolen.

We live in a world where there are too many knees on necks and not enough embraces from doulas.

We live in a world where we are traumatized by or numb to injustice:
we hide behind locked doors, paralyzed by fear, hoping to separate ourselves from truth.

But God still finds a way in - again and again and again - as God always does.

And the Holy Spirit, God's *ruach*, rushes in,
bringing us peace, and showing us how
to breathe in courage, redemption, transformation, new life....
in order that we might breathe out God's liberating Spirit for all people,
especially those most vulnerable, those most harmed.

The work Jesus calls us to is dangerous, critical work and it is never finished,
but we do not journey alone.

May we trust in the Spirit.

May we trust the risen Lord.

May we trust in each other.

And May we trust that we have everything we need to
breathe deep,
face our fears,
and boldly carry on.

ⁱ Shaila Dewan. "Expert Witness Pinpoints Floyd's Final Breath and Dismisses Talk of Overdose." *The New York Times*. April 8, 2021.