

The Gift of the Resurrected Christ
John 20:19-23
April 11, 2021

Have you ever had difficulty breathing or shortness of breath? It is called dyspnea. It is a very uncomfortable feeling. It happens sometimes as the result of exercise, like running really fast, or nasal congestion. Neither of them are harmful but in other situations, shortness of breath may be a sign of a serious heart or lung disease. When you cannot breathe easily, you feel as if you are going to die.

Breath is linked with life. To breathe is to live. The ancient Yoga masters believed that the way we breathe determined the length and quality of our life. They taught that slow, deep, and rhythmic breathing could keep the body well supplied with oxygen, and that could contribute to a longer and healthier life.

We can find the connection between breath and life in many languages. For example, the Latin word *spiritus* means spirit, courage, and vigor. It also means breath. The same idea is found in Greek as well as in Hebrew. The Greek word *pneuma* and Hebrew *ruach* both mean spirit as well as breath or wind. The Sanskrit word *prana* means breath and respiration. It also means energy, vitality, and spirit. I am sure there are other languages that show the same kind of link between breath and life.

When Adam, the first man, was created physically, God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a “living being.”¹ When Ezekiel was taken to a valley of dry bones, God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the Spirit to breathe upon the dry bones. When he did, the dry bones became the living beings.² On Easter night, Jesus came to the disheartened, discouraged and fear-filled disciples and “breathed on them” and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”³ Was it to give them life, hope, energy and courage?

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, the very breath that gives life and the power to do what God wanted them to do. This breath was the gift of the Risen Christ. When Christ breathed on them, he was giving them a life, a new life. With his breath something new was being created in them. These disciples became the living Church, the *ekklesia*.

¹ Genesis 2:7.

² Ezekiel 37:9-10.

³ John 20:22.

We translate the Greek word *ekklesia* as the Church, but it literally means the assembly that is called out for a specific purpose. The disciples were no longer just the followers of Christ. Now, they had become the Church, an assembly, a group of people who were chosen and sent out for a specific purpose. To them, Jesus gave the same call and the same power that Jesus himself had received when he was sent by the Father. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”⁴

In other words, the call that Jesus had received from the Father is the same call that Jesus had given to his disciples. This call was the call to reconcile humanity to God. St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19 said, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

St. Paul is saying exactly what Jesus had said to his disciples. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Paul says, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...And he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation.” Jesus came to reconcile the humanity with God through his death on the cross. By Jesus’ death on the cross, God no longer counts people’s sins against them. That is how the reconciliation between God and humanity is established. Now it is our mission to proclaim that reconciliation to the world.

Then Jesus gave the disciples the very source of power and authority to do this mission. The source of the power and authority was the Holy Spirit. “He (Jesus) breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” The power and authority to carry out the mission of reconciliation comes from the Holy Spirit. It is the power and authority to proclaim God’s forgiveness of sins, the reconciliation of God.

In other words, the primary task of the Church is to bring God’s forgiveness and his reconciliation to people. That is what the Church’s mission is. And for this mission, the Spirit of God, the breath of God, is given to the Church.

Notice that Christ gives the Spirit not to an individual but to the group gathered together. When we think of receiving the Holy Spirit, we often think of it as an individual experience. Sometimes it happens that way but this is not always the case. It can be a corporate experience. It certainly happened as a corporate experience for the disciples. This is not to say that the disciples did not receive the Holy Spirit individually; they did. They all received the Holy Spirit individually

⁴ John 20:21.

but they also received it together. Each of them received it as a part of the group. It was a communal experience.

Even on the Day of Pentecost when the disciples received the Holy Spirit, it also happened as a communal and a corporate experience.

According to the Book of Acts, the way the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost happened in a dramatic and powerful fashion. There was a sound of violent wind coming from heaven, and then there was a visible fire. The tongues of fire landed on each of the disciples. It was dramatic but on the night of Easter, the Holy Spirit was given to them in a very quiet and peaceful way.

It shows us that how we receive the Holy Spirit is not as important as what happens after we have received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us comfort and strength no matter what we face in life.

When the disciples received the Holy Spirit, their lives and their spirits were completely changed. Their fears subsided. Their disappointments vanished. Their hope revived. Their courage emboldened. What they experienced on the night of Easter is an unspeakable relief and joy.

Bishop Bob Morgan in his book *Who's Coming To Dinner?* tells a powerful story about a Dutch pastor and his family. During the Second World War this Dutch pastor and his family had been hiding Jewish people in their home from Nazis. This was very dangerous because if they were discovered their lives would be in jeopardy. However, what they feared most actually happened. They were discovered.

One night in the darkness, they heard the sound of heavy boots and the loud impatient knocking on the door. The whole family was arrested as well as the Jewish people they were hiding in their home. They were loaded into a train, into a cattle car to be taken to one of the notorious death camps. All night long the Dutch pastor and his family rode along in heart-breaking anguish. They were not sure where they would end up. The cattle car was packed with other prisoners. All of them were absolutely terrified. They knew they were being taken to one of the concentration camps.

Finally, the long night ended and the train stopped. The doors of the cattle car were opened and they were marched out. They were lined up beside the railroad tracks, resigned to unspeakable pain, as they knew they would be separated from each other and ultimately killed. But in the midst of their gloom,

they discovered some amazing good news... good news beyond belief. They discovered in the bright morning sunlight that they were not in a death camp, not in Germany at all. They were in Switzerland!

Those who came to arrest them at night were not their captors. They were their liberators. Instead of being marched to death, they were welcomed to new life. In the midst of great joy and relief, the Dutch pastor said, “What do you do with such a gift?” Can you imagine their sense of relief and joy?⁵

Something like that had happened to the disciples on the night of Easter. They were terrified when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Then they were confused with the news of Christ’s resurrection. They were confused because they had never experienced it. They had never seen anyone come back to life after being crucified but then it actually happened to them. The risen Christ stood among them. It was actually too good to be true, too unrealistic to be believed. Jesus appeared in their midst.

When it was obvious that they were shocked and in disbelief, Jesus showed them his hands and side. Still, it was hard for them to believe. It was overwhelming. This is exactly the time when Jesus gave them this gift of comfort and assurance, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the comforter!

It was the Holy Spirit that calmed them, comforted them and gave them the assurance of Christ’s resurrection. That was the gift the resurrected Christ had given them. Through faith the Lord has also given us the same gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. What we need to do is to let the Holy Spirit work in us.

Without the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot have the assurance of Christ’s resurrection because the resurrection is too unrealistic, too fantastic, and too outrageous. But when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us through faith the resurrection of Christ becomes our conviction. We need to open our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit.

You know, in the Bible, faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” There are many things that amaze us in this world. Many things we don’t understand. Many things surprise us because we didn’t think they were possible. That is one of the joys of having faith, being surprised by the grace of God. The life of Jesus, his teachings, his death, his resurrection, and his promises continue to surprise us.

⁵ An illustration under the subject of “Holy Spirit” by James W. Moore. www.esermons.com

I read them again and again and I say to myself, “This isn’t possible!” However, the truth of the matter is that it is not only possible; but it is true. Because it is true, because Christ is alive and he is our Lord, we can face all challenges. We can depend on the one who has defeated the power of death, the one who is the Lord of life and death. May this resurrection faith give us strength and confidence each and every day!