

The God Who Never Gives up on Us

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Psalm 16, Acts 2:14a, 22–32, John 20:19–31

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“In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up....but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground – then the Lord god formed man (Adam or earthling) from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And the earthling became a living being.”
Genesis 2:4a–7

Right from the beginning, the earliest humans had a sense that their life was given to them by the breathe of God and that there was an intimate connection with the Creator, as intimate as our own flesh and blood, as the water we drink, the earth we grow our food in. Debbie Blue, a writer in the Christian Century, reflects on the earthiness of this story of creation, in how it reveals how God has had an amazingly intimate relationship with our bodies. God puts God's hands in the dirt and forms a human – rolls it, shapes it, wets the clay with spit and sculpts the finer details, the lips and toes. And then God puts God's mouth up against the nostrils of the creature and breathes life into it.

We have a sense that the psalmist also knew the Creator in this intimate, experiential kind of way, an experience which is overwhelmingly positive and good, seeping into the very depths of his heart and soul. There were many others gods for this man to choose from as there still are today, but he could not help but choose the God who gave him life, who protected him, who held him in God's hand.

It was this God who would offer him counsel and wisdom in the darkness of the night, saving his thoughts from evil, relaxing his anxiety so that his body would rest secure. The writer of this psalm, perhaps David himself, knew God in the breathing, sleeping, dreaming, joying and delighting of his life, experiencing God through the senses of his body.

Do we know God simply as an idea, as the object of creeds, as an intellectual concept that can be relegated to the dustbins when we feel we know more brilliant or technical solutions to problems? Or is God a living, breathing One whom we experience as a real, living reality, in our own flesh and blood? The central message of the Easter proclamation is the bodily resurrection of Jesus – not a concept we can ever explain or understand intellectually, but one in which we experience God again and again as the giver of life – real life in flesh and blood.

The gospel of John talks about the life in terms of food and water and being born (again). I was reminded again of the fragility of birth when Judy (our secretary) emailed us photos of her new granddaughter, Eva, who was born this week in Cincinnati, Ohio, the images of her exhausted son and daughter-in-law. In those pictures of this little newborn girl with her black hair plastered to her head, still wet from birth, you could almost hear her taking in her first breathe of life announcing that her journey has begun. Welcome to your new family Eva and may you be blessed.

John gives us an equally marvelous description of the breathe of life that the risen Jesus breathes upon the disciples. They are gathered together in a room on that first Easter night, in fear for their

lives when Jesus appears to them, walking through their closed doors (so we know this is no ordinary body) and shows them his hands and his side. In doing so, they are not to forget this his suffering was real, that the powers of the Empire could cause real harm and damage. Yet in his appearing to the disciples, resurrected, it showed that God's love and wisdom could not be defeated, even by the powers of oppression and death. The resurrection showed that Jesus' life was vindicated by God.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their joint book *The Last Week: A day-by-day account of Jesus's Final week in Jerusalem*, they cite two central affirmations of the whole Easter drama: firstly that "Jesus Lives" and that "God has vindicated Jesus. God has said 'yes' to Jesus and 'no' to the powers who executed him. Easter is not about an afterlife or about happy endings. Easter is God's 'yes' to Jesus against the powers who killed him." pg 205

John's gospel makes these truths real through the experience of the disciples who are invited to touch the wounds of the risen Jesus. They are not to forget the powers that they will confront in their future. As a profound gesture of love and new creation, they are empowered, breathed upon again with the breathe of life – this time by Jesus. Creator – Jesus – Holy Spirit – the closest we will get to a formulation of the Trinity in scripture. It is not a doctrine, but it is an experience of a loving God that brings peace to those who are anxious, afraid and confused.

"Peace be with you." We long for that peace too, don't we? This has long been coined, the age of anxiety, even though I believe every age and generation has had tremendous anxieties to deal with in the process of surviving. I know there are huge anxieties in our community, especially the many people who phoned this past week for help to cover their hydro bills, those who are dealing with illness, or the death of a loved one, some in our own extended family who are on a suicide watch for a son.

The Citizens Inquiry into Uranium Mining in Ontario will be held at our church in the next few weeks, where the powerful financial and government forces will be challenged by those who are seeking to give a voice to the environment, for aboriginal people, for those who fear for our collective health and well-being of all people. We know that when we open our hearts and minds to the world around us there is indeed tremendous anxiety and fear and tremendous responsibility on our part to respond in faith.

Were this story of the living presence of the risen Jesus who breathed peace into the lives of the frightened disciples all a delusion, or a hallucination, then we would not be here today, nor would we have any good news for our world, nor any witness, private or public. It is normal to hold back our assessment of the situation, to wonder if there is any hope, to wonder if Jesus really was raised from death and what that might have been like.

John introduces a third appearance story in his gospel, a week after the first two (the first appearance being to Mary Magdalene) as if to explore this question. This time it is Thomas who appears, who wants to really test the depths of his experience of the risen Christ. Traditionally Thomas has been expressed in a negative light as 'the doubter', as one who lacks faith, but now he is held up more as the seeker, someone who simply wants his own firsthand experience of faith.

All of the generations beyond the original group of disciples are indeed in that position, needing to accept the testimony of those who first gathered who received the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus himself does not condemn Thomas, but offers him what he seeks – the gift of peace and a material, physical experience of his resurrected body – to touch his wounded hands and side. Jesus words then offer a blessing, not only for Thomas, but for all who believe without seeing. Jesus does not offer Thomas and the other disciples a belief system, but he offers them life for

their souls. In Hebrew our souls, our spirit, our nephesh is more like a throat than gnosis (spiritual knowing). It's the organ of ingestion: what we eat with, drink and breathe with, what's needy in us, what is animal.

God knows our need and reaches toward us to breathe life into us. As one writer has asked – What if Christ lives in us, not so much like a metaphor, but like breath? What if the love and the grace of God is something that is present to all our senses: our heart, our kidneys, liver, pulse? Maybe it's not as present to our rational minds, and yet it is keeping us alive. The love of God is a presence so enormous, so permeating, so thorough that it's mistaken for absence. Easter is less the founding narrative of a religion than the breaking through into our world of “the utterly vivacious,” “the ineffably effervescent”, “the entirely deathless” life of God. (Christian Century, Mar 25, 08)

We are never alone, never abandoned. “Peace be with you.” Let the risen Christ breathe new life into you, allowing you to forgive what needs to be forgiven, softening the hard place, strengthening the weak places, offering wisdom where there is confusion, healing where the wounds of your life are too much to bear alone, giving you a voice for justice.

May the peace of Jesus be with us, bringing us blessing and hope, so that we might bring that word of peace and hope to others. You are the light of the world, and through you, the hope and love that you share, the world will know that Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia, Amen.

Prayer of the People – Centring Prayer

God, I breathe in your calm/ I breathe out my worries.

Merciful and loving God,
we come into your presence today
hoping in some way to touch you,
to see for ourselves the truth of your resurrection.
Gather up our lingering fears and confusion,
meet our doubts with compassion and understanding.

God, I breathe in your calm/ I breathe out my worries.

Open our eyes to your love and grace surround us...
in the sights and sounds of springs arrival,
in the goodness of the food that nourishes our bodies,
in the love and support of friends, family, people who truly do care.

God, I breathe in your calm/ I breathe out my worries.

Open our ears to hear you calling us to new challenges.
Challenges concerning care for our earth...
concerning peace in our world...
concerning the health of our people...
concerning the stewardship of our churches...

God, I breathe in your calm/ I breathe out my worries.

Open our imaginations to new possibilities...
in how to leave greener lives, more friendly to the earth.
Ways to bring peace to our world, to reconcile our differences, how to work for justice.
to imagine the healing that is possible in our own lives, freeing the divine potential within each of us...

God, I breathe in your calm/ I breathe out my worries.

Come anew to all who have been unable to believe;
come anew to all who have known you but turned away from you.
Help us to experience you standing in our midst, saying, "Peace, peace."
May our broken world and our broken lives be transformed in your image. We offer woundedness
and turn to you for healing and newness of life as we pray together saying...

Our Father...