

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 20:19-23

"Breath Of Life"

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples in a locked room, and shows them his wounded hands and side. Twice he says *"Peace be with you,"* not simply as the everyday greeting, *shalom*, but to reassure his frightened disciples that he is not a ghost. They are relieved, overjoyed. Then Jesus says and does three things that will define their lives, and those of all Christians, forever afterwards.

1) *The Commission of the Church*

The first is to commission his disciples, and therefore the Church. *"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."* What is that about?

The Father "sending his Son" is the foundation of Jesus' authority and of his mission. He has been sent by his Father to "save the world." He has been sent to bring "grace and truth." He has been sent to bring new life, life from above; he has been sent to bring forgiveness of sins; he has been sent to *"draw all people to himself when he is lifted up."*

But now Jesus' work on earth is done. Sin has been atoned for, God's kingdom has been inaugurated, death has been defeated; and Jesus is about to send his disciples out to declare this to the world, and to offer redemption to people who respond to Jesus' invitation to enter God's family. But notice: *"as the Father sent, I send..."* Not only must the Church declare what Jesus has done, they must carry out *their* mission in the way Jesus carried out *his* mission.

How was that? With the authority of the Father, with truth and grace, with love and forgiveness, with unity and service. If the world is to be convinced that Jesus is the redeemer, the world must see in his Church the marks of his presence, the grace and forgiveness, that attracted so many people to him in 1st C. Israel. Giving attention to "the least and the lost," placing value on women and children and other "insignificant" people, opposing hypocrisy and cynicism and corruption and violence; welcoming the despised and the unclean, bringing grace to "tax-collectors and sinners," absorbing criticism for "breaking the traditions" when people are in need; caring about people whether they are hungry, diseased, sinful or possessed.

Being ready to confront the proud and the violent, the status-seekers, the ones desperate to stay in power; being ready to call sin, sin; and goodness, goodness. Being ready to teach people eager to learn, ready to bring wisdom into situations of conflict, ready to give time and energy, and experience rejection and exhaustion. Ready to spend time alone in prayer, in fasting, resisting temptation, constantly re-dedicating himself to do the will of the Father.

"As the Father sent me, I am sending you." Go to all the people, to the lost and imprisoned and homeless and hungry, the people in slavery and in exile, the ones living in the wilderness of the world; and bring them my message of redemption and forgiveness, and do it in the way I have shown you.

2) *The Presence and Power of the Spirit*

But how can any ordinary person, even “a believer,” do such things, carry out such a mission? Where can the strength, the wisdom, the compassion, the endurance, come from? The same place Jesus found these things – in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

“*Receive the Holy Spirit,*” says Jesus to his disciples. How can *he* give them the Spirit? Because the Spirit has been “*given to him without measure.*” When he was baptized, the dove descended on him to symbolize the coming of the Spirit: he was the one, said John the Baptist, “*on whom the Spirit came and remained.*” He could therefore “*baptize with the Holy Spirit.*” Jesus had the Spirit, and could give it to those who believed in him.

So he said the Spirit could make people “*born again,*” “*born from above,*” “*born of God.*” The Spirit could bring new life to those who believed. The Spirit could, when Jesus had been “*glorified*” in his Crucifixion – Resurrection-Ascension, become a source of thirst-quenching and life-giving water to people who believed; the Spirit could become a “*river of living water springing up within*” those who believed. And when the time came for Jesus to return to the Father and send out his disciples on their mission, the Spirit would come on *them* in power, and remain, so that they would know the truth about Jesus, be empowered to witness to him, and be able to bring both conviction of sin and forgiveness of sins to the world.

The Spirit would be the presence and power of Jesus and of the Father in and among the disciples when Jesus was no longer with them. The Spirit would be their guide, their teacher, their protector, their counselor – “*another Counselor,*” just as Jesus was - who would be the advocate in their defense, and the prosecutor of their case against sin and evil.

All these promises, Jesus conveyed in a simple command: “*Receive the Holy Spirit,*”

and in a deeply symbolic act: “*Jesus breathed on them.*” This is the word used in Genesis when God the Creator “*breathes into the nostrils*” of the man he has made from clay, and the man becomes a living being. The “*breath of God*” is the breath of life, and the risen Jesus breathes into his disciples a new life, a new creation. It is almost a “*resurrection*” for them – a metaphorical “*resurrection*” that describes the new way of life that disciples of Jesus are to demonstrate in this world.

So the nice ambiguity in Hebrew and Greek – that in each language one word can mean *wind, breath or spirit* - is in play as the risen Jesus “*breathes*” the Holy Spirit into and among his disciples. We see it again at Pentecost - to which this event is, you could say, preparatory – when “*the sound of a rushing mighty wind fills the house*” and the Spirit comes in power, is poured out, to remain, on the 120 or more disciples of Jesus who are gathered in Jerusalem.

The Church will need the power of the Spirit to carry out Jesus’ commission to “*go into all the world,*” just as the Father sent Jesus to Israel in the power of the Spirit.

3) *The Forgiveness of Sins*

As the church is sent in the power of the Spirit, she must bring Jesus’ message of redemption and the forgiveness of sins. “*If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven,*” says Jesus. Those words have, of course, caused some confusion. First, realize that “*they are forgiven*” is standard passive-voice biblical language for “*God forgives them.*”

But did Jesus mean that the Church has authority to *define what is sin*, and to pronounce it forgiven or not, and that God would ratify their decision by actually forgiving? If that’s true, who is in charge? Or, was Jesus perhaps giving *special power to the Apostles* - and to their duly ordained successors - to pronounce on sin? Some think so, and the tradition grew up that an ordained priest could hear confession of

your sin and then pronounce *te absolvo*, "I absolve you."

The Protestant Reformation preferred a different interpretation: what the minister may do is to *proclaim that Christ forgives* the penitent: as Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, "*He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.*" On this interpretation of Jesus' words, the church, in the power of the Spirit, proclaims the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ: *he has accomplished* it in his Crucifixion and Resurrection; now his church is to proclaim it.

4) *Our Mission, Our Power, Our Message*

So how well are we, the Church in the 21st C., carrying out *our mission*? Are we carrying the truth that "Jesus redeems" to people who are trapped in sin, in despair, lost in the desert, thirsty for truth and meaning; to people whose marriages, finances, jobs, homes, children are in disarray; whose lives are full of anxiety? Are we even getting the message of Jesus to the next generation, to our children and grandchildren? Do we *believe* deeply enough that "Jesus saves" that we are willing to expend any effort to get that word out to other people? If we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes a difference in people's lives, who is ready to help in Sunday School?

On our Board of Deacons, we have considered a number of times whether our church could host meetings of AA, NA, or most recently, Alateen. Would you agree that the power of the Holy Spirit to change people's lives is worth risk to our property? There are people here who are trying hard to mend the deep divisions in this community over taxes and school budgets. Would you be willing to help, or do you think polarization is good for our community?

Do you think the Spirit can offer anything to the frail or demented old, and their caregivers? How can we support people whose lives now center on the care of their aged parents? What about the teens-and-20s who

are strung out by high expectations, fierce competition, and a fear of failure that drives too many to depression or drink or drugs or death? How can we help them? Does anyone want to volunteer to help in youth work?

And when Christians do go out to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed in the home, the community and the workplace, what power do we use? Do we want large numbers, or the backing of the rich and powerful? Are powerful people, the rich and famous, the best ambassadors for Christ - or the most vulnerable to famous temptations? Is invisible service to insignificant people a waste of time, talent and effort? Or is the hidden, invisible, secret power of the Holy Spirit within and among Christians precisely what motivates, strengthens, guides, protects us in all our missions to a messed-up world?

And what do we say about sin, evil, forgiveness? Do we know the grace of God well enough to declare that when people come in faith and repentance to Jesus Christ, no sin is too bad to be forgiven? Do we think there are sins that are unforgivable? Should the church declare that some things *really are* wrong, sinful, and should be repented of? Are forgiveness and restoration the same thing?

We are sent into the world as Jesus was, and we need to "*receive the Holy Spirit.*" So let us pray that Jesus will "breathe the breath of life" into you and me.

Let us pray...