



23 April 2022

## **Breath (John 20.19-31)**

© Susanna Pain

On this ANZAC day weekend, at the time of war in Ukraine, and other places in the world. I don't mention war, but peace, the longing of our hearts.

(I think of CPR, of life giving breath to restart a heart to enliven a body so it lives.)

'Jesus breathed on them'

At my farewell service in Sale at the end of last year, one of the speakers mentioned that I say, 'breathe' a lot, and that would be one of the things she would remember about me. Until then, I didn't realise how often I say, 'breathe, just breathe'.

A strange thing to say really, after all, we do breathe, all the time, otherwise we wouldn't be alive, but there is something about paying attention to the breath, noticing, and intentionally breathing more slowly.

Christine Valters Painter comments in her book, 'Breath Prayer': 'breath is such an intimate companion. One that sustains us moment by moment even as we are entirely unaware of that sustaining gift. Yet when we bring our intention to it, it also becomes an ally for slowing down, for touching stillness'.

Recently, when someone said she was anxious and having trouble breathing, a psychologist suggested to her, breathe in for 4, hold for 4, breath out for 4, hold for 4, and so on. She called it 'box breathing'. Try it, and notice what it does for you. In these Covid times we are very aware of breath or the lack of breath. People who have had Covid recently, speak of shortness of breath, not being able to breathe, and coughing and tiredness. Without breath, we die.

'We are not called to choose between physical or spiritual but rather to see them as magnificently woven together; we can see beneath the surface of things as our senses

become the gateway to a deeper layer everywhere we look. Ordinary tasks become luminous with grace.<sup>1</sup> says Christine Valters Paintner.

And now, here in our reading from John's gospel we hear that Jesus breathed on his friends, a breath of life, the breath of creation, and said "receive holy spirit" He breathed the essence of life it self, like at the creation of the world, and he commissioned them to carry on his work, the work of breath/Spirit in the world. Bruce Epperly says, 'Genesis 1 describes God's initial creative act as breathing over a chaotic void, bringing forth the possibility of the emerging and evolving universe. God breathes into humankind, animating what was before inert. In fact, after Easter, for Jesus ' first followers, every breath is a prayer'.<sup>2</sup> With every breath, we can experience God's presence.

Divine revelation includes dramatic mystical moments, but the primary way of knowing, indeed, the most essential revelatory moments are as undramatic as breathing. Revelation, is found in sharing breath with creation and taking our role as healers of creation. The invitation is to commit ourselves to God's resurrection power with every breath.<sup>3</sup>

In the Christian western tradition we are in the second weekend of the Easter season. Last weekend we played out the story of loss and grief and transformation of life. In our reading today we are back on that Sunday.

There is not the joy and celebration we experienced last Sunday on the island. The disciples are still living with Friday, with Saturday, with uncertainty and fear when, in John's Gospel the crucified risen Jesus appears with his wounds, with his vulnerability. He becomes present to his friends. "peace", he says, twice, and he shows them who he is. He shows them his wounds. His first words are, a common enough greeting, shalom, peace, peace at this terrible time of war and natural disaster, peace in your fear and anxiety, peace. Then, after connecting them into that deeper experience of God's shalom, then in

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Painter in breath prayer location 131

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2019/04/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-of-easter-april-28-2019/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2019/04/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-of-easter-april-28-2019/>

this deeply embodied scene, he breathes on them, bringing them back to life and hope, inviting forgiveness.

We don't know what happens next. Did they then begin to celebrate? Did they then go out and tell the story? Were they convinced? Were they encouraged? Did the transformation begin to happen?

Tom wasn't there.

He missed out on all this, and this story that he heard was not convincing, he protested, he doubted. Thomas helps us to linger, just a little bit, just for a little while; to remember that the grief was real. Thomas tells us that it's ok. Because we sometimes forget to wonder, to question, and to sit in that lingering for a while<sup>4</sup>.

But Thomas came back. He was there, faithful to the end and without his asking, Jesus showed him his vulnerability, his woundedness, encouraged him, encouraged him to have hope, to believe in the possible. And his transformation, in John's Gospel at least is immediate "my Lord and my God", he says. Wow!? What a change from doubt to an expansion of faith and hope.

Bruce Prewer reflects: *Human doubt has led to radical change and growth in the Hebrew and Christian tradition.*

*'Long, long ago, some Jews believed that God asked of them human sacrifices. But prophets emerged who said: "I doubt that", Through their doubt the sacrifice of children in the valley of Hinnom was finally stopped.*

*Long ago many Jews were taught: "God loves only Jews. Others are rubbish." But some Jews said: "I doubt that". And from the deeper faith that issued from that doubt the story of Jonah emerged which declared God's love even for wicked, pagan cities like ancient Nineveh.*

*Long ago many Jews claimed that God could only be known and worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem. But one visionary had his doubts and from his own experience he wrote a psalm; "Where shall I flee from your Spirit? Where shall I hide from your Presence? If I ascend up into heaven you are there. If I make my bed in hell, behold you are there."*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/linger-a-little>

*Then arrived a Jew called Jesus. He was a remarkable doubter of many of the things he had been taught.*

*He had been taught that pagans like Romans were hopeless; but he saw remarkable faith in a Roman centurion whose child was ill.*

*He had been taught that women were inferior beings who should be kept hidden in their homes; but he doubted that and chose women to travel with him among the band of disciples. Jesus had been taught “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but he doubted that and taught: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you.” It had been instilled in Jesus that the greatest in the whole world was the Torah and its righteous law, but Jesus doubted and instead taught that the greatest thing was love.*

*In the story of Christianity, doubts have again and again led to a larger faith and love. I believe most doubt is more usually a sign of spiritual health rather than malady.<sup>5</sup>*

Thomas had doubts, but he refused to surrender to the fear which kept the disciples shut up in that locked room. He both ventured out and then had the courage to return: to face a community which had had an experience he did not share and be willing to insist on his own experience of God.<sup>6</sup>

'Doubt reflects the seriousness with which we take our faith. Thomas 'doubt is a quest for faith, and the Jesus Thomas discovers is known by his wounds. God in Christ suffers and still suffers the pain of crucifixion. God in Christ is still wounded. God identifies with the pain of Jesus, indeed, feels Jesus 'pain intimately, and God also identifies with our pain. How can the One who felt Jesus 'pain on the Cross, and every child's cry – the cry of a starving child, the hopelessness of a parent whose child is gunned down on a city street, the refugee family – have any desire to inflict more suffering on the earth and its peoples?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BEASTER2.htm>

<sup>6</sup> [https://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/pool/choose\\_life.htm](https://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/pool/choose_life.htm)

I believe God loves doubters, agnostics, and strugglers as well as those who perceive themselves as certain of their faith. All are invited as equals to God's Table of Love.<sup>7</sup>

Epperly affirms, 'Easter is embodied. It is known by God's breathing in us. It is known by embracing the pain of our world. In God's love for the world, God enables us to have the stature to become God's partners in healing the world, practicing resurrection with each new day. Breathing deeply, we can face our doubts, knowing that we are never outside the scope of inspiration.'

So what? So Christianity is born and continues in us. Easter has happened and we continue bearing witness to our truth, what you know, what makes sense. We are breathed, Sharing the challenging empowering inclusive ministry of Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. And in this contemplative community of Benedictus, we witness to our faith through our lives, through our prayer, through our questions, through our action, our breath, our peace, living out our passion..

Sighs too deep for words – Julie Perrin

*In this silence*

*we are held.*

*The Spirit*

*breathes*

*sighs*

*asks.*

*In this silence*

*God holds us*

*no words*

*no trying.*

*In this silence*

*God breathes in us. ...*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2019/04/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-of-easter-april-28-2019/>

We have been  
breathed on  
we are breathed through  
we are  
alive  
with possibility  
with love.