

This doubting Thomas passage is familiar to many people. I've usually felt connected with Thomas because I have doubts all the time, about many things, including my faith in God. Several different verses caught my attention this year: "...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked,... Jesus came and stood among them....Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" And later he asks Thomas- "'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"

Before I focus on these words, a little sidebar here, let's talk about air, breath, and breathing. The molecules of the air we breathe is a mixture of 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, and 1% trace amounts of stuff including water vapor. When we exhale the percentage of carbon dioxide and oxygen changes: O₂ decreases to 16.5%; CO₂ increases to 4.5% because, as we learned in elementary science, our cells use oxygen to release energy and give out carbon dioxide as a byproduct. Hang on to these statistics; we'll come back to them.

In today's gospel, first, Jesus commands the disciples (and us today) to leave the safety of the locked room; perhaps a metaphor for us to leave the safe places of our lives? Why leave? To go witness to the good news of Jesus's resurrection, how much God loves us. To go forth to serve others justly with compassion, and mercy — The Way as it's often labeled that Jesus modeled for us. Note that Jesus doesn't stop with a command. He empowers them in their witnessing by breathing the Holy Spirit (HS) on them.

Perhaps it's helpful to unpack this connection of breath & HS. This and the flames of the HS at Pentecost are not the first times breath is connected to God's Spirit. God's Spirit in the Old Testament (OT) is identified with the Hebrew word ruach (ROO-aak) meaning breath. Our breathing that is automatic evokes the Spirit, who, like our breath is always with us, even when we are unaware of it. In the Genesis creation story the HS's breath is the creative power who gives life to all God creates. God's Spirit-self breathes into Adam who comes alive. Ezekiel looking at those dry bones obeys God's command to "...say to the breath: ...Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' ...and (as Ezekiel sees) the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." The OT writers chronicle God's creative spirit-breath empowering certain prophets, kings and judges as needed. Centuries later Jesus breathed the Spirit on the disciples he is empowering and sending out around the world. Centuries since then, today in 2023, we can tap into this holy creative source to serve as God's hands, feet, eyes and ears. We need empowerment too.

Prayer is a main avenue to listen for the HS's voice. Consider the Breath Prayer. There are many forms of breath prayers that hold up breathing as a way to deepen our connection to the divine. One suggestion is an East Indian Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello's version. His directions are simple. Close your eyes. Be aware of your breathing. The air around us is like an immense ocean that is charged with the power and the presence of God. God is the oxygen of our soul that we need to breathe in all day long. Ponder the truth that Christ is in us. Deeply, slowly breathe in, repeating a name of God. When exhaling, voice a deep desire of the heart. An example might be Breathe in "Lord;" breathe out "here I

am,” or Breathe in “Jesus;” breathe out “have mercy on me.” This short prayer can be repeated over and over throughout the day. One of the joys of our faith is that Jesus’s resurrection opens our awareness of the Holy Spirit’s presence in each of us personally.

Jesus’s resurrection may have been the one time big miracle but we are witnesses to smaller resurrection miracles are taking place all the time. God’s Spirit-self is continually creating life out of death today. We can pray every day for the HS to help us be open to seeing the signs. Spring is here; life is slowly emerging. This last week a bush I swore was dead popped out several, miniscule green buds.

My faith, and perhaps yours, also seems to move in cycles. Like Thomas we have periods of doubt. We may wonder where God is when we are in great suffering. We may become disillusioned by trying to understand the mystery of faith. We may ask how can God allow bad things to happen to good people? During these times we can embrace Jesus’s greeting to the disciples, “Peace be unto you.” Yes, he wished to calm their fears but his Peace is connected to his sending them out to witness and serve. His Peace gives them not only peace of mind, but also the courage and confidence that the HS is supporting & guiding their words and actions. They can believe everything that is unfolding is good and from God. This same Peace can assure and bolster us on our faith journeys.

Sometimes we have doubts because we have no first hand proof of an event. At first this was Thomas’s problem. He wasn’t accepting hearsay. But then he did see proof and believed. I especially love Jesus’s next statement: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Well, we were not in that locked room seeing actual proof. Rather we are among the multitudes who haven’t seen and yet still believe; Jesus confirms we are especially blessed. Our faith grows when we’re willing to believe and are open to see small God resurrection miracles unfolding every day slowly or quickly, loudly or softly, obviously or partially hidden.

We may have doubts and we may not have burning bush exciting God sightings, but we can connect with our breath to God’s breath, his Spirit-self, the HS. That’s huge. Jesus’s death, resurrection & ascension means we have a direct connection to God the Father. Envision breathing in that 21% O₂ in the air. If we exhale only 16.5% that means 4.5% of God’s breath remains in our bodies. Imagine that breath circulating to every part of our bodies, being used to replace old cells, resurrecting them for new work. Likewise when we exhale we jettison 4.5% CO₂ which is 1125 times more than we inhale. Visualize all our fears, insecurities, and doubts clinging to the CO₂ being pushed out. With each breath we sluff off more negativity that the Holy Spirit replaces with creative empowerment. Each exhale clears the soul, keeping us receptive for what our next breath reveals. We become open to the “peace that surpasses all understanding.” We open ourselves to the voice of God. God uses our doubts, the bottom of the exhale, as an opening for love, a way to fill us with light & truth.

Breath prayer reminds us that each breath we are given is God’s gift and that God’s Spirit is as near to us as our own breath. Be surrounded by and infused with God’s Spirit breath. Believe this fans the flames of the divine spark within each of us. Know that we are blessed because we believe although we have not seen. Take all this and be secure in God’s Peace that like the disciples we are fully empowered to walk the paths Jesus sends us on to spread unconditional Love and to serve others with joy, confidence and courage. Alleluia! Amen!

