

“And Jesus breathed on them” Sermon on Sunday, April 28, 2019

Based on John 20

When was the last time you were at the dentist? I think for me it was just about two or three months ago. I always marvel at how painless the regular procedures have become these days. The hygienist and the dentist will go to any length to make sure that you're comfortable, which is a far cry from my childhood memories when all that German chocolate caused a cavity or two, even though my mother had given us the genetic gift of good teeth. The old-school dentist would descend upon your mouth and decide that a little ice would do the trick. I later concluded that he must have learned anesthesia during the war. I remember one time jumping out of the chair in pain.

Nowadays, a patient is treated like royalty. You no longer just sit in the dental chair. You lie down. You are being asked five times if you are comfortable. And, God forbid, if the dentist should have to use a drill, you will be numbed until you are numb for good. But it's also a strangely vulnerable position. With mouth wide open, you are suddenly at the mercy of someone holding very sharp metal instruments in her hand. She in that blue paper mask – the dental hygienist is usually female - stares down your throat while asking pleasant questions, questions which are impossible to answer. How do you speak when someone is poking around inside your mouth with an instrument resembling an icepick? The hygienist asks questions, and the patient grunts in varied tones, right until the dental floss brushes through your molars.

I used to think that the blue mask was to protect the hygienist from germs - a facial shield for the bacteria-filled spray that splashes up in the process of cleaning. But there is another possibility. The real purpose of that mask may be to protect the hygienist from the blunt force of a patient's breath. Bleu cheese dressing breath. Coffee-on-an-empty-stomach breath. Garlic rigatoni breath. Just ask your dental hygienist if she can identify what you had for dinner last night; and she would know, I bet, exactly what you ate, regardless of whether or not you furiously brushed your teeth before you that appointment. Breath reveals a lot about a person.

Which brings us to the Easter story and the gospel for this morning. According to John, the first thing Jesus did upon his resurrection, once he had picked the dirt clods from his eyebrows, was to breathe on his disciples. He opened his mouth and let them have it--three days' worth of empty stomach breath. Before they had any chance to pull away in revulsion, Jesus said to all of those disciples, "Peace be with you"--words that evidently felt to them like a breath of fresh air. Jesus breathed on those disciples.

"Okay, men inhale again! And with this next breath, I am going to infuse you with the power and the will to forgive other people. It's quite the gift, especially if you will put it to work. But first you must inhale, and then that breath will become a true part of you." All of this took place in a locked room with poor ventilation. The air in that room with the disciples was thick with anxiety!

But wait, one of the men was missing, one of the twins wasn't there that night. It was Thomas, and if he was an identical twin like Gwen and Madi in our confirmation class, it was probably mighty tough to tell him apart from his brother. In order to tell him apart you'd have to pay close attention to the details. Maybe one brother had a mole somewhere that the other didn't have, or a slightly different eye color, or a particular expression that gave him away. With twins, you have to pay attention to details you know, which is why I have been so perfect in telling our confirmation twins, Gwen and Madi, apart. Right up to this year, I am still asking them, "Are you Gwen or are you Madi?"

Thomas was a twin, and he was not there when Jesus showed up and breathed on the rest of them. But Thomas did pay attention to details. "Wait a moment," he said. Did you check his hands and feet? Did you actually touch them? Did he have the wounds from the cross? Was he still in pain? Thomas, famously, challenged the reports conveyed to him. Interestingly, he didn't ask his fellow brothers, "What was his breadth like? When he breathed on you?" Or maybe John left this detail out. Simply, too much information! But Thomas made this bold proclamation: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

This story was particularly important for Christians of the late first century, the time when John likely put together these 21 chapters of gospel story. It was a time when they were already two generations removed from the actual events that led to the birth of the Christian faith. At that point, John's readers only knew people who had known people who had seen Jesus. At that point, they were wondering whether these accounts from their grandparents' generation were legit. Did grandpa make this up? The generation that John wrote to could identify with Thomas's skepticism, his desire of wanting to have proof and certainty. They wanted to know if it was really true.

Of course, the message that John sends back to them via this Easter story runs totally counter to their wishes and to the philosophy most people live by to this day: "I have to see it to believe it!" Jesus' advice to the skeptical disciples, Thomas included, is this: "Everybody can 'believe' once they see, but blessed are those who believe without seeing." And that is a message shared by spiritual masters all over the world, in so many religions, that there has to be truth to it. Because there is, despite our modern emphasis on science and empirical evidence, still so much that we can't see or prove or put our fingers on. Yes, there are things about you that won't show up under any microscope. You'll have to close your eyes and look into your own soul. This thing we are talking about, this "faith," is not called "spiritual" for nothing. In the spiritual world you almost have to become blind in order to see. Have you ever noticed how much attention Jesus lavishes on blind people? He said, Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's for us! He is speaking to you and to me. He is speaking to the impoverished soul of modern man and woman. We have learned to see through microscopes and telescopes, but in the scope of things, we are still blind.

There is one last very important aspect in this story that I want to emphasize. It's very obvious that Jesus' transformation from death to life leaves his wounds in place. Jesus allowed Thomas to put his hands into his wounds. It probably hurt... a lot! What's the significance of that? People, in the course of their lives, acquire wounds and scars. We all have them, marks of suffering on our bodies and on our souls. We all have places that frankly, hurt. Whatever it is - an accident, a traumatic relationship, overcoming cancer, the loss of a dear person... scars will show up somewhere. The older you get the more scars you can show. This Easter message is so important because it doesn't mislead us into believing that we can just move on and forget about all those painful experiences, as if they never happened. That's not how it works in life. The resurrected Christ is also the wounded Christ, and the biggest sign of his resurrection is in fact the presence of his wounds and scars. That means, while we are being transformed with Jesus into a new identity, the old parts of our existence are still there. Being raised with Christ means that we have learned, ever so gingerly, to accept those scars, to incorporate them into our lives, to be-friend them, to make peace with the pain and the death they brought to us. And now, they can no longer hold us back. That's Easter! That's transformation! That's resurrection! And the breadth that Jesus breathed on his disciples? It smelled like that, I am sure. It smelled like freedom, transformation, life, peace! Inhale it, and live. **Amen.**

Acknowledgment: Parts of the sermon are from Pastor Peter Marty (the dentist idea), Editor of Christianity Today. Gratefully, Pastor AW