

“People Breathing Peace”

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A reflection for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

John 20.19-24

April 10, 2016

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood in the middle of them. He said, “Peace to you.”

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were ecstatic with joy.

Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you release anyone’s sins, they are released; if you hold onto them, they are held.”

Adapted from The Common English Bible (CEB) translation

A couple of weeks ago, just before supper, two guys came to our door. They had official-looking yellow vests with official-looking ID badges. They said there were doing some sort of energy-saving thing. They insisted they were not selling anything. (I know, I should have listened to the warning bell in my head.)

I let them in. Took them downstairs. They looked around. (My alarm bell was getting louder.) They kept finding things wrong in my house. (Louder.) Finally, even for someone dense like me, it was obvious. They’d lied to get inside, so they could bend me to buy something I did not need.

I blew up. Ordered them out. Called them liars, and other things too. Marched them to the door, down the steps. I was angry. I was in the right.

But Jesus calls me to breathe peace.

II

Jesus shows up right in the middle of the disciples. Remarkable, because they’ve locked the door, afraid of “the Jews” it says. Really, that’s just the Jewish leadership who had conspired against Jesus, not the whole Jewish people. In the centuries since, it’s usually been Jews needing to hide from Christians.¹

It’s also remarkable that Jesus shows up in the middle of *the disciples*. Just days before, they’d been running away, denying they’d ever met “what’s his name.” All their bravado about their bravery evaporated as soon as trouble showed up. Now, they’re hearing Jesus

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1161.

is back! Maybe he's angry? Are they hiding from him too!² (Thankfully, the first thing he says to them is "*Peace.*")

Of course, what's most remarkable about Jesus showing up is . . . well . . . he is dead. At least, he was, and once someone is "pronounced," they always stay that way. Not this time. He shows them where the nails hoisted him by his wrists and the spear thrust into his side. It's like he's saying, "It's me, the same Jesus!" His resurrection is just as this-worldly as his crucifixion was.³ That's why his resurrection can make all the difference.

"*Peace to you,*" he says, twice. That's "*Shalom lechem*" in Hebrew. *Shalom* is a big idea. *Shalom* is wholeness, balance, justice, rightness, holiness, right relationships. When Jesus says "*Shalom lechem,*" to these denying, cowardly former-followers, he is speaking love, blessing and forgiveness. He is giving them a gift. "*Peace to you.*" They can be disciples again.

III

Will Campbell was a Baptist pastor in Tennessee; he died a few years ago. During the Civil Rights era, he was a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. He was among the few White southern clergy who put their lives on the line for African-Americans. Later, he visited and ministered to members of the racist Ku Klux Klan who were in prison for their terrorism.⁴

Campbell told of a trip he'd just taken, to visit a 73-year-old in prison. A group of them went. After a long drive, they got there and started through security. A young guard stopped them, and said one of them had shoes on that didn't meet regulations. Pastor Campbell wondered aloud if there might be an exception made. The guard yelled, "*One more word out of you and none of you see anyone here today!*"

Weeks later, Pastor Will was telling this to a friend, David. He asked David, with a plaintive stare, "*What would you do? . . . What do you do with him?*"

David writes:

It had not occurred to me to extend any degree of concern to the angry young man. In my mind, I was in fact ready to pounce on him personally, but Will was inviting me to something . . . and schooling me in a longer struggle of which he was a veteran. . . . Weeks later, he was still mourning it and wondering how he might have more

² The idea that they were hiding from Jesus is an intriguing one! Thanks to Scott Hozee for raising this for me. (cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-2c/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)

³ C. H. Dodd wrote, "In order that the death-and-resurrection of Christ may constitute an 'epoch-making' event for mankind, it is necessary that it should actually happen — that the entire event, death-and-resurrection together, should happen — *in this world*. That is what the quasi-physical features of the post-resurrection appearances are intended to affirm." Quoted in Bruner, 1160.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_D._Campbell

*righteously engaged [the outburst of one prison guard], one sad soul enmeshed, like we all are, in an endlessly adversarial culture.*⁵

Even for a saint like Will Campbell, it's hard to know how to breathe peace.

IV

We breathe in fear. Why did I flip out on those guys in my house? I was afraid of being scammed. What fears led that young guard to snap at old Will Campbell? Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi said: *"The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear."*⁶ Fear locks us behind closed doors. Then, Jesus shows up, into the middle of this group of disciples.

"Shalom," he gives and promises. He says this to us disciples who have majored in messing up. I can sing *"I have decided to follow Jesus!"* with all the conviction of a church-camp choir. But vacation ends, and my faithful following lasts until my first confrontation.

Then, precisely to disciples like us, Jesus says, *"Just as the Father sends me, so I am sending you!"*

Why was Jesus sent?

*God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that every single person who simply entrusts themselves to him will never be destroyed, but will have deep, lasting life.*⁷

Jesus now sends us on this same mission. Can we boldly imagine this?

God loves the world so much that God sends you (and you, and you), all of us together, so that every single person who simply trusts the One you represent will not be destroyed, but have deep, lasting life.

Is that what Jesus is saying here? *"Just as the Father sends me, so I am sending you!"* Sounds like it.⁸

That makes me very uncomfortable. The idea that somehow I carry in me the healing, reconciling, peacemaking and life-giving work of Jesus. I know it's Jesus who does all those things. He is the Saviour, not you or me. Still, this idea that we are his representatives? That a hard-bitten at way-too-young-an-age prison guard depends on Will Campbell to represent the forgiving grace of Jesus? Or that some door-to-door, shady seller of stuff-I-don't-need is depending on me to represent the healing love of Jesus?

Crazy? Yes! As crazy as a crucified man resurrected!

⁵ David Dark, "The Context of Love is the World: Liturgies of Incarceration" *Context* (Spring 2016), 12f.

⁶ Quoted by Michael Palmer. www.aplainaccount.org/#!/John-201930/bhul0/56f918f20cf20a08ed0943f2

⁷ My translation of John 3:16.

⁸ I got the provocative idea from Bruner, 1163.

V

Jesus breathes on them: *“Here is the Holy Spirit.”*

In the very beginning, *“The Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life’s breath into his nostrils. The human came to life.”*⁹

Ezekiel was in a valley of bones. The prophet started proclaiming to these remains of people long-dead. Foolish, but that’s what the Lord God told him to do. (Sometimes, preachers do strange things! Amen?) *“There was a great noise . . . then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. . . . The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. . . . When the breath entered them, they came to life. . . .”*¹⁰

The Lord comes right into the middle of dead disciples, and breathes into us.

Because otherwise, we’ve got no chance to be people who breathe peace. No matter how strongly we believe. No matter how passionately we pray. No matter our best intentions. Someone is going to scam us or snap at us and set us off. God might bring us to scoundrels, or bigots, traders in fear, or fashioners of terror. And we’ll already be tired, or grumpy, or distracted. And we’ll be scared, because stuff is scary.

We only have a chance, because the Spirit of Jesus fills us. We will only breathe out shalom for others, when we’ve been breathing in his shalom for us.

So breathe deeply, and pray that the Spirit will fill you.

⁹ Genesis 2.7 (Common English Bible)

¹⁰ Excerpts from Ezekiel 37:1-10 (CEB)