

***“Both/And: Breathing and Praising”***

Psalm 150; John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter

Message for April 24, 2022

Rev. Trish Eckert

Today’s Bible Wisdom Teachings speak to both breathing and praise – gifts of life. We hear the joy and gratitude that the Psalmist lifts up for us in the text, as well as the realities of grappling with resurrection and the breath of the Holy Spirit, infusing the disciples with the Divine presence.

This morning we need to make space for our Annual Gathering – a worshipful and celebratory time in which we will reflect on our past year and discern way forward as we continue to live into the many transitions that the Tippe community is undertaking.

So, I am focusing on the reading from the Gospel of John today – the passage that is most often explored when talking about doubt. I think many of us are awash in doubt as we strive to move through especially uncertain times. When I last preached on this particular text, we were one month into the pandemic, and we could not have comprehended what was to come. In many ways, we have yet to comprehend what we’ve been through and what continues to unfold.

It seems that the condition of our own hearts, of our own time, enables us to relate to the disciples to some degree. The disciples were grieving, they were hiding in fear for their lives, they struggled to imagine the future.

Our community continues to move through so many transitions, so many unknowns, and yet I have witnessed in the four months that I have been with you, how faithful and flexible you are – how willing you are to try new things, to go with the flow, to step into the unknown. I want to note, also, that there is value in reflecting on the condition of your heart, and acknowledging the grief, the loss, the pain – even as we embrace what is to come. Today’s text provides us a moment to pause and consider what was happening for the disciples and what it means for us as we strive to be disciples ourselves.

Just yesterday, with a mix of both joy and grief, we attended Gary Oleksyn’s funeral, celebrating his life and remembering all that he has meant to us.

There have been many losses here at Tippe in recent years and making space to honor that is so important as we make our way forward. Yet, often when we try to vision what is to come, we are filled with fear, with doubt, our grief rises, and it can be difficult to know what to do next.

We hear fear, doubt and grief in today's Gospel reading. Even those unfamiliar with the Bible have heard about "Doubting Thomas." The name is sometimes applied to people who are struggling to believe what is right in front of them. Yet Thomas is not the only one among his company to have doubts. Just as we heard last week, Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but did not believe until the risen Christ appeared and spoke to her directly. Then when she told the disciples about what she had seen and heard; they dismissed her words because they had not seen for themselves. When, on Easter evening, Jesus appeared where they were hiding, he showed them his hands and his side, and it was only then that the disciples rejoiced. It happens, that Thomas was not at that first appearance.

So, like others in this story, Thomas wanted to see for himself. Jesus did not express impatience with his disciples' skepticism and the need for something more. Jesus addresses doubt by giving his disciples a chance to take in what seems impossible.

While reflecting on this passage this week, I got thinking about what happens when you are in the midst of deep grief – it feels like a miracle, and often a curse, just to *breathe*. In today's sacred story, breath is precisely what Jesus comes to give his disciples – those who were with him along the journey and now are so lost, reeling from all that has occurred and struggling to discern what to do next. "*He breathed on them*", John tells us in his gospel. More than any words could have done, this breath comes as gift, as grace. We are brought back into our bodies. This breath is a gift as we struggle with fear and grief and uncertainty. The breath connects us as it moves in us, around us, and through us - it is a sacred strand that runs through all of our lives.

Today's story reminds us that God can handle our doubts. Jesus illustrates that patience in today's text - the Divine meets us where we are. Blind faith is not somehow better than questioning and seeking - those questions and that seeking lead us to new places. Doubt and questioning can lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light within each of us.

We are living in a time of profound and radical change. We need our imaginations, we need each other, we need stories, to move through this and find what is being born on the other side - renewal, rebirth, transformation. If we are intentional in this challenging time, we can enter new levels of awareness and inclusion. Just as Jesus embraced the disciples with all of their needs and questions, we can embrace one another in all of our difference and take note of the gifts and wisdom that each of us have to share with this community and beyond.

In the coming week I invite you to consider what renewal, rebirth, and transformation means to you - how do you experience it in your own life?

Amen