

Don't Forget to Breathe (Reprise) | Patrick Ryan – John 20:19-31 – 4/7/24

It's Easter evening. The disciples are huddled together in a room that's far too small for them. They're sweating it out. The air is stagnant. They're cooped up and fearful. They lack courage and purpose.

Three days ago, their courage and purpose had been crucified on a cross just outside Jerusalem. Earlier that morning, Mary Magdalene ran to the locked room the rest of the disciples were huddled in. Out of breath from running, but also from whatever it is that happens to us when fear and confusion mix with joy, she told the disciples that Jesus was alive, walking, talking, and breathing. But, for those first disciples her message landed as conjecture and hearsay.

Easter holds many questions, doesn't it? Sometimes faith is easy. There are moments when believing in what we have not seen comes effortlessly. But there are just as many moments when our faith doesn't carry us very far. There they were—the Christ faithful, certainly more than 11 of them—perhaps as many as 120 men and women—hiding behind locked doors, whispering out of fear of being found, out of breath and terrified that if they were found, they might end up on a cross just like their Master.

"I've seen the Lord!" Mary had told them that morning. But Mary's news didn't release the disciples. Here they are still in bunker mode. Isn't it strange that the followers of the Risen One had closed themselves inside a tomb of their own making? Even a week later, they're still cooped-up inside—their hearts and lives contained, their breathing constricted. In the days after that first Easter, they were less than alive, discouraged, and in the dark, with the wind knocked out of them. It's a wonder that the Jesus movement was birthed at all.

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And then there's Thomas. Usually when we talk about the poor guy the word *doubt* comes up. But there's something much more sinister at play than doubt. Doubt we can live with. It's hard for us not to. But hope? Hope is something we can't survive without.

Whenever fear takes up more space in our lives than hope, life grows smaller. The walls we build to keep others out get thicker, they move in closer. And locked doors can do more than protect us, they can also trap us inside, close off possibility; we can languish behind them.

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It's then that the Christ-faithful hear a voice they recognize: "Peace be with you!" I imagine their heads turning and their mouths falling open. Jesus is standing among

them, speaking real words from his real mouth, and looking at the disciples through eyes they recognize. I imagine that room grew larger then. In Jesus's presence there's always more room to breathe.

Then Jesus spoke words of hope that replaced their fear. "Peace be with you!" And after saying so, Jesus breathed on them, giving them their breath back, reviving their hopelessness and gifting them with new God-energy for their worn down and failing spirits. With the resurrected Jesus in their company, everything seemed to expand. Walls, eyes, and lungs.

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Sometime in my late teens, I remember fixing breakfast on a Saturday morning while my mom exercised to one of those Jane Fonda workout videos. Remember those? Jane Fonda in full 80's-style workout gear—huge aerobic socks, leotard, perm, hairspray, headband, the whole get-up.

I listened in as I poured my cereal. Every eight seconds or so—and with an energetic voice—Jane Fonda would say, "Don't forget to breathe!" I would laugh whenever she said that. "Who would forget to breathe?" I thought. Do we really need to be reminded of such things?

I'm middle age now. The grey hair is multiplying. I know how heavy the weight of the world is—how hard our responsibilities fall upon us, how easy it is to forget the most basic bits of self-care. Jane Fonda was onto something.

"Don't forget to breathe." That's good advice.

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The second Sunday of Easter can become *Bashing Thomas Day*. Poor guy. You say a couple words of defiance to a few of your friends in some room one evening, and from then on and into eternity, your whole life becomes defined by them.

We're not going to say much about Thomas today, because there's so much more to this moment than Thomas' doubting. This is also the moment when the living Jesus—the One who was once dead—comes of His disciples and breathes his Spirit into their languishing spirits. This moment is a preview of Pentecost. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says. "Don't forget to breathe."

Jesus came to his first followers that Easter evening to give them their life back. He revives them with the same divine breath that brought the cosmos into existence when God's exhale wept over the waters on the first day of creation—with that spirit.

Jesus comes to us in all the tight spaces of our lives and offers what we never once asked for but are desperately in need of—the Holy Spirit, the promise of a larger life and bigger lungs. That first Easter evening, Jesus administered CPR to dead women and men, rescuing them from the lifeless confines of their fear and all the too-small spaces they were languishing inside of. And he’s still doing that for you and for me.

Don’t forget to breathe.

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The risen Jesus still finds us where we are, and how we are, and gifts us with his borrowed breath so we have what it takes to tell the good news of the Easter story with our words and the way we live. Jesus is more than alive, and Jesus working to have us come alive.

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“Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus says. Then this: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they’re forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.” Interesting words. We wonder why they’re here.

Forgiveness is like respiration itself; the *unwillingness* to forgive is like *holding* our breath. When we refuse to forgive others, we’re the ones who suffocate. Isn’t that the truth? We languish in the stale oxygen of something done to us that we haven’t forgiven another for, and when we do that, we cut off our own air supply. We hurt ourselves.

The ability to forgive—to release ourselves and others from the dark, confining, and breathless spaces where we and they are locked up—is like breathing in new life. Easter air. The breath of Jesus brings peace and the power to forgive, both of which unleash us from the closed-off rooms in our own hearts and lives, and free us to be new people, more than alive, so we can be the Good-News-presence that Jesus wants us to be.

Jesus gives us the lungs we need to proclaim that Good News to a world that has the wind knocked out of it—that has forgotten how to breathe. Jesus is always entering our constricted spaces, offering us air for our collapsed lungs, and speaking his word: “Peace be with you. No more fear. Don’t forget to breathe.”

That’s the Easter message.

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So, let’s take a deep breath. Go ahead. Take it in. We are his disciples. And we wish to see the resurrected Jesus in our midst. We long to keep him as close to us as the air

within our lungs. We are the ones who pray to have our eyes adjusted to the new rays of Easter light that come in through the cracks of all the walls we've built up around us. We come to worship in hopes of seeing Jesus. We come to this space to be with others, express our unbelief out loud, wrestle out our fears, engage our doubt, ask "Why" questions, and remind one another of the One who we follow.

We bring what little amount of faith we have, whatever we can muster; but still we come, hoping that Jesus will meet us, speak a word of peace to us, expand our lungs and lives, and invite us to come closer to him so we may believe, trust more fully and live a larger life.

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The Holy Spirit is all around you. Don't forget to breathe.

Happy Easter!

All praises to the One who made it all and finds it beautiful! Alleluia! Amen.