

Last Sunday – Easter Day – was so inspiring! You could just *feel* the sense of anticipation. There was so much to just *revel* in – the beautiful music Brendan and the choir had to offer, the energy in the congregation, the beauty of the altar resplendent in flowers. The story of Jesus being raised from the dead is *always* such good news, and it evoked deep gratitude and praise from us. We *love* to be inspired. We *need* inspiration!

What does it mean to be *inspired*? Some of you know the pep rallies of school team sports, the cheerleaders, and pep bands. The raucous crowds *love* to inspire their favorite team. The crowd *breathes* some particular kind of life and energy into the competitors so they will play their very best.

The same is true of a brilliant orator – he or she *inspires* the crowds. A festival parade or a fireworks display can bring *inspiration*. Many turn to music for inspiration, but we are also inspired by creativity, beauty, humor, imagination, and dreams.

There is an image of *inspiration* revealed in the reading from today's Gospel. Just days after Jesus was killed by the crowds, a group of his friends were together behind locked doors, nervous and fearful that Jesus' enemies might now be ready to hunt for them. Suddenly and mysteriously the risen Christ was *there*, among them, greeting them with his peace. They were relieved, re-energized, rejoicing. And then, says John's Gospel, "he *breathed* on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" He *inspired* them. Literally. Let me explain why I say it that way.

Go all the way back to the earliest word in Genesis. When God created the first person, Genesis tells us "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life." (*Gen. 2:7*) Jump forward to the prophet Ezekiel coming into the valley of the dry bones. Speaking as a mouthpiece for the Lord, he said, "I will cause *breath* to enter you, and you shall live." (*Ezek. 37:5*) Now, in today's Gospel, Jesus comes into the midst of his disillusioned disciples and *breathes* new life into them.

You see, to be *inspired* is to receive *breath*, for in the language of the Bible, *breath* and *spirit* are the same word. In Hebrew, it's *ruach*; in Greek, it's *pneuma*. But in both languages the same thing is true: in both, the word means **both breath and spirit**. In the

same way, to be *enthused* (in New Testament Greek) is to be *in God*. Inspiration and God are inextricably linked.

So when the risen Christ came near his friends, *his* new life gave *them* new life. He was close to them, and they *felt* his breath and knew he was alive. He told them, “I’m giving you new spirit – the Holy Spirit. And this is what my Spirit will do through you.”

The Bible contains other passages where Jesus entrusted important work to his followers, and these words from the Bible inform us of what we need to be doing in today’s world:

- There is the **Great Commission** in Matthew’s Gospel. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (*Mt. 28: 19*)
- There is the **Great Commandment** in John’s Gospel. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (*Jn. 13:34*)

I’m not certain if the words we are hearing today could be called the “**Great Gift**” or the “**Great Burden**,” but in giving his Holy Spirit to his followers, Jesus admonished them: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (*Jn. 20:23*)

People of God, this is *your* inspiration for today. This is what God is *breathing* into you today. God’s forgiveness of sin is mediated *through you*. **You** have the power to announce the gift of God’s forgiveness, and, when you do, forgiveness will happen. This is the power God has put into *your* hands: the power of the Holy Spirit within you means that when you announce God’s forgiveness, *sins are forgiven*.

But there’s a “flip side” to that joyous responsibility. And that “flip side” is this: When you *retain* the sins of any, they **are retained**. To *forgive* is to let go; to *retain* is to hang on. This power was given to that original group of Jesus’ followers and has been handed on generation to generation to Jesus’ followers today – you. Us.

This is even *more* Easter inspiration. Last Sunday we heard of the empty tomb. Today we hear of the risen Christ appearing to his followers, bringing these results:

- A great **peace** was given them as a sign of the new life Christ brought.
- A purposeful **mission** was given to Jesus' followers.
- The **Holy Spirit**, the authority and power *for* that mission, was also given to Jesus' followers; and
- The responsibility to **announce** this new relationship with God through the gift of forgiveness was imparted to them.

Let us never minimize this task. As followers of Jesus in today's world, we were not sent like John the Baptist to call *everyone* to repentance so that we can announce their forgiveness. We are not the angry prophets proclaiming damnation to all who *fail* to repent. We are not the agents of gloom and doom predicting the wrath to come. Nor are we the judges who *declare* guilt or innocence to the crowds. We have been commissioned to speak of a forgiving God, for it is only those who will *trust* that forgiveness who will have the courage to repent.

We have heard of the God whose steadfast love endures forever, who desires that all will be saved and come to the awareness of truth, who is slow to anger and abounding in mercy. We are to speak a word of grace to a world that knows only the vocabulary of earning and deserving. There is not one single thing we can do that will cause God to love us *more*. There is not one single thing we can do that will cause God to love us *less*. It is God's nature to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving, and we have been entrusted with *declaring* that message to a waiting world.

The empty tomb was a source of great inspiration last Sunday. Today it's the risen Christ, who is not only alive but is bursting with gifts, bringing peace, the Holy Spirit, and the authority to announce God's forgiveness. May you and I feel his breath in us today and be inspired anew! Amen.