

When We Conspire Together  
John 20: 19-30  
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Irondequoit United Church of Christ  
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Dearly Beloved,  
*Though the doors of the house where the disciples had met  
were locked for fear of the people,  
Jesus came and stood among them and said,  
“Peace be with you.”  
After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.*  
—John 20.19-20

The Damaged One emerges from trauma  
with peace.

His wounds, his brokenness, evidence  
of what such peace endures.

Through doors of pain, walls of despair,  
he comes with peace.

Yours, beloved,  
he comes through.

Gravestone, locked door, unbelief  
do not keep him from you.

The wounds still gape. The room is fraught—  
but he is not.

Now and yet to come, he's here.  
Now your pain can breathe.

Steve Garnass Holmes

The Gospel writer John chose an encounter with breath, doubts, and scars to help us come to belief, and this year more than ever I am grateful for this choice. Why you ask? Because is this not the territory we know well after 14 months of Covid, social isolation, racial injustice, and political rancor and strife? Yes, we are a resurrected people but the world around us is still bleeding and wounded. We recognize Jesus in the faces of those who have lost loved ones to the disease, or in the faces of the families of new victims of gun violence. We recognize Jesus in George Floyd calling out that he can't breathe then seeing his hand reach out for that tire and go

limp. Jesus and his scars are everywhere. Don't we all just want to go and hide, turn off the news, stay in bed sometimes, or nurse our own wounds? Don't we now?

Dear Ones, the crucified Christ, the Damaged One, emerges from trauma with peace. The disciples entombed themselves into that upper room on the very same day they heard the news he was resurrected.

The One who had broken out of death then had to restore life to his paralyzed followers. He had to resuscitate them with his very breath, his Spirit, and offer him his peace--- the kind of peace that calm a raging storm. We need both---the restorative breath of life and a peace that can face all kinds of violence with nonviolence; all kinds of anxiety and fear with stillness and calm.

Let's talk about breath for a moment. Let's talk about its significance in Judaism and our own lives. The word for breath in Hebrew is *Ruach*. Just as God gave Adam *Ruach*, Jesus now breathes into his disciples with his breath. So significant is breath to Judaism that the Jewish name for God--Yahweh—was never spoken but always breathed. Its correct pronunciation is an attempt to imitate the sound of inhalation and exhalation.

The poet Steve Garnass Holmes picks up this truth and applies it to Jesus calling him our lungs.

God took the dust up from the ground  
and breathed into it  
and it became a living being.  
The Risen One breathes into you  
the breath of heaven;  
you become a risen being.  
One Spirit, one breath,  
one breathing.  
Jesus is your lungs.

In a Celtic spirituality workshop online this week, we were asked to write our own breath prayer or poem using the phrases “This breath in” and “This breath out.” Seemed simple enough except my post Covid double pneumonia reality has made breathing not something I take for granted. Here is the short poem I wrote:

This breathing in  
a catch in the chest  
This breathing out  
a sigh loosened  
This breathing in  
still a gasp for scarce air  
this breathing out  
long like a wave making it to the shore  
finally

“Through the doors of our pain, walls of despair” Jesus comes to give us breathing space, Dear Ones. He does not come to compel our beliefs or demand doctrinal subservience. He respects our doubts and questions. Just like the way God breathed into Adam and gave him his *Ruach*, Jesus breathes into us to give us new life and energy to face not only our own daily struggles and challenges but to follow him back into the world to serve all those others still

suffocating, bleeding, and scared. If we can open ourselves to this divine breath, we will be able to let go of our fears and insecurities and share his spacious peace with others.

So Dear Ones, let us breathe deeply God's presence that inspires and gives life. Let us breathe together with the wounded and scarred Christ, so we can conspire together to be givers of God's good news. As the poet Holmes says at the end of his poem, *Dearly Beloved*:

You are sent, breathed into the world  
spoken in love, sung out in beauty,  
Word made flesh.

Every breath you are reborn,  
We are all re-breathed,  
Christ is risen.

To dare to dance again, we need to find and trust the breath of our lifelong partner, allow his wounded hands to hold us close so we can hear him whisper, "Peace be with you. Peace be with you."

