

Breath of God
John 20:1-18

This year, Easter Sunday falls amidst COVID-19. We're secluded in our homes and told to wrap our faces in cloth if we dare to go out for groceries or supplies. Walk into the grocery store, and you'll see people with gloved hands and masked faces wandering quietly through the aisles. Get too close, and you'll get a wide-eyed look of alarm on the face of that passerby. We're all hiding from an invisible beast.

"The Beast" is a virus that attacks ferociously in the night with spiked fevers, aches, lung binding, and hallucinations. It's a "breath-taking" virus that steals the breath from people's bodies in a terrifying way, striking suddenly, leaving us frightened and breathless. With no cure in the foreseeable future, the only thing we can do is hide, covering our faces with cloth, hoping to keep the aggressive beast away from our lungs.

In so many ways, this brutal virus makes many feel as if they've been locked in a dark tomb for an impossibly long time, as though the darkness of "Good Friday" might go on forever. There's little hope in sight.

And yet all around us, I see signs of spring, signs of awakening, signs of hope, signs of resurrection. True, life as we know it has been dampened for a while, covered in what feels like "grave clothing." But spring blooms around us. Birds sing, the sun bursts through winter clouds, trees bud, flowers unfurl, the ground thaws as God unwraps an entirely new landscape of color and life.

I wonder what it must have felt like to Jesus those "three days" in the tomb, knowing resurrection was imminent, yet waiting for dawn to come on that magnificent morning when the stone was rolled away, and the sun streamed through, and an "angel of the Lord" removed the grave cloth from Jesus' face, and the Holy Spirit breathed holy breath again bringing life into His stricken body and made it rise like Ezekiel's bones from the valley of the shadow of death. Three days of darkness. Then, new and restored life. Not the same life. But a restored, resurrected life.

In the gospel of John, we read an especially detailed account of Jesus' resurrection. We read first and foremost that Mary Magdalene approached the tomb while it was still dark. She didn't wait until the morning came and the news of Jesus' resurrection had spread around Jerusalem. Mary came with expectation after the third day, while it was still dark, while all were still without hope, while the pall of death still shrouded the land and covered her heart. And she found the stone taken away, and the grave opened.

From there, Mary ran to two other disciples and bade them to look, Peter, and "the disciple Jesus loved." The first thing that disciple does is enter the tomb and find the linen cloths lying there, the ones that had covered Jesus' broken body. He noticed that the face cloth wasn't with the other linen cloths but was folded up in its own place. Although the two disciples still didn't really understand the idea of resurrection from the scriptures, they saw and trusted what their eyes had perceived. All of this, from looking at the cloths.

Can you imagine that resurrection morning as they did? Maybe we can see it better when we look at it from their vantage point – for at that moment, on that morning they

must have remembered the prophecies that Ezekiel and Isaiah and Daniel and Hosea had spoken.

The disciples realized that when the stone was rolled away, and the darkness opened to the light, the cloth from Jesus' face had first to be removed so that the breath of God could breathe life into his body and raise him up. The gentle and loving folding of that face cloth feels both intimate and beautiful in this resurrection story, as though God gazed down on His Son, removed that cloth from Jesus' nostrils and mouth, and declared death defeated.

The breath of the Holy Spirit must have come powerfully into Him, must have filled that cave with heavenly light, must have lifted Him up and stood Him on His feet, must have refreshed and restored His body, creating from the pall of death, a new Human Being. At that, the rest of the cloths must have fallen from His limbs and torso to the cave floor, as He exited the tomb.

After the two disciples left the tomb, Mary remained. When she looked into the tomb, she saw bathed in holy light two "angels of God" at both head and foot of where Jesus had been, like an afterglow of God's breath. When she turned around, there she saw Jesus, His body fresh with life, and yet, not as before.

Today, as we celebrate Easter morning, that resurrection story means so much more to us - perhaps more than ever before. For we have been living these past few months as though in darkness, as though confined in a tomblike existence. Life as we've known it has stopped cold. We don't go out to work. We don't go out to play. We hide our faces; we guard our lungs. We walk zombie-like through our homes and streets, frightened and covered in our own kind of grave cloths, so that the cold breath of death might pass us by for a time.

But only for a time. Life in waiting is only merely that, a time of waiting. And yet a time of expectation. For we know that no matter what, that beast has no power over us. If we seem to lose someone dear to us, we know that God's resurrection breath will raise them up. And those still in waiting will see a new dawn, soon. Very soon.

Mary's faith kept her expectant and waiting, watching for something new to change, something miraculous to happen. She may not have known when, but on that third day, she came nevertheless, still during the darkness, knowing that God would come through, and life would be restored.

At the moment of God's resurrection promise, God removed the grave clothes from Jesus' face and breathed new life into His body. He rose up, and the tomb became emptied. And as soon as Mary and the disciples realized what had happened and that Life had been restored, they knew that God's promise would be fulfilled. And that life had changed. That never again would Jesus walk the earth as before. Never again would they sit on the hillsides drawing crowds of people. That time had passed. That time was before. A new life and a new time had dawned, and with it, a new kind of spirit, and a new kind of people.

We too are the resurrection people, watching and waiting as the people of God. Be expectant. Dawn is coming. And when it comes, our grave cloths will be removed, and we'll breathe again. The spring we see around us will manifest in many ways, and life will start again. We'll again feel the bustle of people and cars, we'll know the joy of relationships and friends. We'll again eat together, and sing together, and worship together, and share love together.

And it will all be new. Never again will life be quite the same. For our experiences of death and darkness change us. We emerge not the same but renewed and restored. We'll become wiser and more understanding about the world and God's amazing miracles. We'll become more joyful about life, and appreciate everything in it even more than before.

God will not restore us so that we can go back to what was. God will restore us so that we can go forward - differently - as new people - as resurrection people.

Friends - Resurrection is coming. The signs are all around us. Watch. Wait. Listen for the breath. Long for the change. And let us today celebrate the Lord who gives Life and restores Life, now and always. Amen.