

# Towson Presbyterian Church

April 8, 2018 – The Second Sunday in the Season of Easter

Genesis 2:4-9 and John 20:19-31

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*“The Season of Easter”*

The scripture that immediately comes before this story is John’s Easter morning story, where Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and she mistakes him for the gardener. She finally recognizes him, they embrace, and Jesus tells her to go and share the Good News with the rest of the disciples.

And so we assume she did and today’s scripture begins, and we find the disciples later that day behind a locked door, and they are *afraid*. They are not celebrating, they are not sharing this good news, and we could make the assumption that they did not believe Mary’s news.

And then Jesus appears in front of them, and let’s note what he *does not* say to them. He does not say, “Geez, guys, *what do I have to do for you to believe and to trust? I mean, you betrayed me a few days ago and now this. You still won’t believe. Are you ever going to get this right? How can I ever trust you if you can’t ever trust me? It just seems like you fail over and over and over again! You’re never going to get it right, are you?*”

That is not what Jesus said. He doesn’t pile guilt on the disciples and he doesn’t shame them at all. He’s not out to get them for their lack of faith and their failure. Thank, God! Instead, he gives them and us this wonderful picture of God – a God who does not use guilt to get his way, but comes to us with healing, mercy and forgiveness.

*What Jesus does do* when he appears before this group of broken and fearful disciples is he shares peace with them and then invites them into this life of forgiveness. As they have now been forgiven, the disciples now have the power to go and forgive others. They are forgiven themselves, which then gives them the power to forgive. The new reality of Easter and resurrection tells us that us that we have been set free, and now we can set others free.

Easter in the New Testament, and especially in the Gospel of John, is this earth-shaking, earth-rattling event. Jesus was alive again, but at the same time it was so much more than that to the New Testament writers – Jesus was alive but everything had changed and the direction of all of Creation had changed. For the early Christians there was life before Easter *and life after Easter*. And all of creation had started over in way; it was being reborn not in a physical way, but in a spiritual way.

Jesus then offers peace to the disciples, and then he does something kind of strange...he breathes on them and says “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” Now, if you’ve heard this story before, you’re probably used to hearing it and don’t think twice about it. Or you’re simply waiting to get to the good part – the part about Thomas and his doubts.

But if you’re hearing it for the first time, or haven’t heard this story that much, I wonder if you’re saying, “*Well that was weird!*” Jesus walks into the room, gives the peace sign and then *breathes* on them? Well, that’s a little strange!

Yeah, it is kind of strange, and as one of your pastors I'm giving you permission to say, "That was weird."

It is, but it brings us back to the very beginning of the Bible. In Genesis chapter 2, we have the second creation story, where God creates humanity out of the dirt. It's this wonderful picture - God scoops up some dirt from the earth and molds and shapes it into a human, and then *breathes* air and breath into the first human.

This story is one of the most intimate pictures in all of Scripture. It is dripping with intimacy. God breathes into the first human and the breath that we breathe is God's Spirit. The air that moves in and out of our lungs, Scripture tells us, *is God's very breath*. Let that idea and picture sit with you for a moment.

And then in this story God places that first human in a garden, a garden that has the potential for life. It is teeming with the potential for life - trees, plants, vegetation - that can grow and flourish, and God gives that first human the power and authority to help create new life. The first human is to be a co-creator with God to help bring forth life. We could say that is Adam's job description.

To bring us back to today's reading, in this very weird story of Jesus breathing on the disciples, the Gospel of John is telling us that at Easter a new creation is forming. Jesus is not only alive again but everything has changed. As God breathed the Spirit of new life into Adam in Genesis, now Jesus breathes it into the disciples, and they now have the power and authority to help create new life. When we say, "*He is Risen, He is Risen indeed*" on Easter Sunday, we are celebrating the good news of that day, but we are also celebrating the fact that everything has changed at Easter!

So Jesus breathes on them, but Thomas misses out. He's not there. The story then fast-forwards a week to today and Thomas is with the disciples, and they're all still huddled together inside a room. They're *not* out sharing the Easter story and they're not living into their new calling to be co-creators with God of new life. Nothing has really changed for them - Easter day came and went and life just went back to normal.

As I said at the very beginning of our service, Easter is a day *and* it's a season in the life of the church. There are 7 weeks to the season of Easter made up of 50 days that lead us to Pentecost Sunday. 50 days?! And Easter in many ways gets the short end of the straw, doesn't it? It really only gets one day.

Leading up to Easter is the season of Lent - 40 days of this slow walk to the cross. And then Holy Week and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and finally, *finally* Easter. But after that entire 40 days of Lent, the culmination, Easter comes and goes, just like that.

We have to ask ourselves - do we not celebrate Easter enough? Because without Easter Christianity just isn't Christianity. It would still be powerful, absolutely, but it wouldn't be Christianity. Because Easter is our day, and we really only give it one day a year. *I* really only give it a day.

If Lent is a time of self-examination and inner reflection and confession, a time where we peer inside ourselves and maybe find some weeds that need to be uprooted, some areas of our lives that might need to change, then maybe Easter should be a season where we don't uproot but we plant. We plant some seeds and we intentionally wait for New Life to be born and grow around us.

Maybe that's one way we celebrate this season! If Easter is a season that tells us that God has brought new life for us in the resurrection, maybe one of the best ways to *live* the season of Easter, to give it the opportunity to experience it for more than a day, is to watch new life grow around us. To remind us that this is the promise of Easter!

Maybe during this season we need to literally plant some seeds and actually get down into the dirt, and then watch them grow. Maybe this year is the year I finally start that garden in my back yard that I've been meaning to start for the last 4 years! But not only to simply watch something grow, but let it remind us of what this season tells us, that God brings New Life. That is the promise and the hope of Easter.

But besides literally planting seeds, maybe the Easter season is a time for us to take up something new in our lives, something that is life-giving for us and for others. Maybe it's a time to give something new a try, for it might open the door to new possibilities that weren't there before. It might be a doorway for us to hope - to hope in a way that we didn't realize was possible.<sup>1</sup>

If anything, the season of Easter is a reminder that we can hope – we can hope for new life to come in the most unexpected of places.

I'll be completely honest, as I said before – Easter for the most part for me has been a day and *not* a season. It came, and it was amazing, and then it was gone. But this year I'm wondering...where do I see new life springing up around me? What could I take on this season – even if it's only for a month - that is life-giving for me and others? What might point me towards the hope that we find in this season?

Because when we see that the New Life that God brings is indeed possible, well, Jesus' story of breathing on his disciples, it won't sound so weird any more. And this New Creation that came about at Easter, we'll realize that it is working in us and through us, for we are a people who are filled with God's Spirit; we are a people who are agents of healing and forgiveness; we are a people who know and trust that God is bringing New Life *through* each of us.

Towson Presbyterian Church... that is who we are! The Season of Easter is here!

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas for how to live more fully into the Season of Easter were gleaned from N.T. Wright's excellent book *Surprised by Hope*.