

“He Breathed on Them”

A sermon by Don Cummings

John 20:19C 31

John 20:19-22

New Living Translation (NLT)

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹That Sunday evening^[a] the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! “Peace be with you,” he said. ²⁰As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! ²¹Again he said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” ²²Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²

I wish the author of the gospel of John was still around.

I would love to have a conversation with him about why he included in his narrative of Jesus' first appearance to his disciples as a group this intriguing phrase:
"He breathed on them."

What does this mean?
Why did the gospel writer include it in his report of this incredible evening on the day of resurrection?

But since the author of John is not among us any longer, we are left to our own wonderings as to the significance of this phrase, "He breathed upon them."

As I have studied this phrase, it seems to mean at least three things.

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

First, it may be an allusion to Genesis 1:2 which describes conditions at the beginning of creation.

This follows the opening statement of the Bible, "In the beginning God created

the heavens and the earth”
by telling us,
“Now the earth was formless and empty,
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and the Spirit of God
was hovering over the waters.”

The Hebrew word most versions
translate as “spirit” is *ruach*.

It is a word that is rich with meaning.
It can also be translated as
the power of God; or
a wind from God; or
an awesome wind.

The result of this *ruach*,
this awesome wind from God,
this movement of the Spirit of God
was to blow across the elements
of an infant earth in a creative,
life giving act that brought
order out of chaos.

Taking this meaning,
perhaps John’s gospel is suggesting
that Jesus stepped into
the chaos created in his disciples
by his crucifixion
and the mystifying reports
of the empty tomb,
and breathed on them
a new creative, life-giving event,
bringing order out of their personal chaos.

He certainly did do that.

NEW SPIRITUAL LIFE & VITALITY

**Secondly, “He breathed on them,”
seems to be a clear reference to
the first mention of breath in the Bible.**

Genesis 2:7 says,
“The Lord God formed the man
from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils
the breath of life,
and the man became a living being.”

What John may be telling us
is that Jesus was performing
spiritual CPR on his disciples.

We know that their spirits
had been beaten down and
flattened by the crucifixion.

Their spirits had been killed
by the brutality of Rome
and the Jewish establishment,
just as surely as Jesus’ body
had been killed on the cross.

When he appeared to them
that Sunday night as the risen Lord,
they were still reeling from the events

of the previous Friday,
and of that Sunday morning.

Then, in this moment
captured by John in his gospel,
Jesus suddenly appeared to them
in the midst of a room even though
the door was locked.

His greeting to them was
“Peace be with you.”

Then he charged them
with a divine assignment:
*“As the Father has sent me,
I am sending you.”*

“And with that,”
John tells us,
“he breathed on them.”

He brought their wounded, dead spirits
back to life.
He raised them
from their spiritual grave.

He breathed into them
new spiritual vitality.

Before the resurrection,
the disciples were in hiding,
cowering in fear.

After the resurrection,

they were boldly proclaiming
the crucified, risen Christ
in public everywhere.

There is no question
that the risen Jesus
breathed new spiritual life
into the disciples.

EMPOWERED WITH GOD'S OWN POWER

**Thirdly, this phrase,
"He breathed on them"
seems clearly to mean
that Jesus breathed into his disciples
empowerment by the Holy Spirit.**

Here's the full context:
Jesus said to them.
*"Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me,
I am sending you."*
And with that,
he breathed on them and said,
"Receive the Holy Spirit."

Which was to say,
Receive *ruach*.
Receive the awesome wind from God
that creates order out of chaos,
that transforms you into living beings,
that empowers you
with God's own power.

It is not by mere coincidence
that the book of Acts
describes the coming of the Holy Spirit
on the day of Pentecost
as being accompanied by the sound
of a mighty, rushing wind.

Genesis and John and Acts are all talking
about the same awesome Spirit of God,
shaping order out of chaos,
giving life,
empowering.

But, bringing order,
giving life,
empowering for what?

John's gospel tells for what.

THE PURPOSE OF EMPOWERMENT

I have long been intrigued and fascinated
by the Gospel of St. John.
It is so different from the synoptic Gospels
Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And I have been especially drawn
to John's account of Jesus and his disciples
that night before the crucifixion.

In the context of John chapters 13 to 17,
the gospel writer
seems to be presenting to us

Jesus' final earthly words to his followers.

There are many things
in this section of his gospel
that still speak to us today.

One of the most persuasive, I believe,
is when Jesus said to his disciples
*"Anyone who believes in me,
will do the things that I have been doing,
and even greater things than these
shall they do, because
I am going to the father."*

He wasn't kidding.
Anyone who believes in him,
which would include us,
will do not just what Jesus had been doing,
but literally even greater things
than he did.

In recent years,
as I have read this passage
over and over again,
particularly this verse from John 14:12,
I feel like the man in that
FedEx commercial of several years ago
who is talking on the telephone
with someone who is apparently
giving him rapid-fire directions
about things that he needed to do.

We only hear his end of the conversation,
but he is continually saying

in rapid-fire response,
“I can do that,
I can do that,
I can do that,
I can do that,
I can do that,
I can do that,
I can do that,

Then after a long series
of these responses,
he hangs up the phone,
gets this perplexed look on his face,
and says,
“How am I gonna to do that?”

I think that's the response
a lot of Christians have
when they read this verse in John 14:12
where Jesus says *“if you have faith in me
you'll do what I have been doing
and even greater things than these
shall you do.”*

We think about all the things Jesus did,
and we respond by saying,
“How are we gonna do that?”

Thankfully,
Jesus answers this question for us.

One part of the answer
is in this morning's passage
from John chapter 20.

*“And with that he breathed on them and said,
‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”*

Jesus can expect us
to do what he had been doing,
and even greater things,
because he knows
God will empower us
by the same Holy Spirit
with which God empowered him.

So the same Holy Spirit of God
the same *ruach*,
that worked in Jesus,
and enabled Jesus to do what he did,
is now working in you and me
enabling *us* to do what Jesus did.

Just think about some of things Jesus did
that we continue to do.

PREACHING THE GOOD NEWS

For example,
Jesus preached the good news
of God’s redeeming love
to great crowds of people.

We, who have been charged
with continuing to preach
the ministry of reconciliation
that Jesus began,
have preached to far more people

then Jesus ever did.

Any given Sunday,
there are more people in church
hearing the gospel
than there are in all the football stadiums
in America

Pick any well-known Christian leader:
John Wesley, George Whitfield,
Francis Asbury, Philip Otterbein,
Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer,
Phillips Brooks, Bill Hybels, Joel Osteen
and each one of them
has preached to more people
than Jesus ever preached to.

One need only think of Billy Graham
and the millions he preached to
during his lifetime career
to realize that far more people
heard the good news through Billy Graham
than those who heard it
directly from Jesus.

I am not lifting up these preachers
in order to put Jesus down.

By no means.

But they illustrate that this is exactly
what Jesus intended.

THE HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS

Or, take the fact that Jesus healed people.

Today, in the midst of many debates about our healthcare system, we are prone to forget who first laid the foundations of the modern health care system.

In colonial America, in Third World countries, and wherever the Christian church moved one of the first institutions it was instrumental in establishing in those new worlds were hospitals, clinics, and health centers.

In John Wesley's day, even in well-established England, health care was neither affordable nor available to the masses.

If you were not a person of means or wealth, your access to health care was practically nonexistent.

One of the many things that John Wesley did, that reached out to help common people, was to edit and publish the best contemporary medical information of his day into a home health guide that he made available

very inexpensively to the poor.

Today, a survey of every major
American metropolitan area
will turn up Methodist Hospitals
Catholic hospitals
Presbyterian hospitals
Baptist hospitals
Lutheran hospitals
Episcopal hospitals.

These church founded,
church owned,
church operated hospitals
were the forerunners of the modern
health care system.

Upon the foundations they laid
our current system has been built.

In Jesus' day,
prayer was about the only resource
available to most people
with which to confront a health crisis.

Today, prayer continues to play
an essential role in the healing process,
but thankfully,
modern medical and surgical techniques
are able to effect healing
in a wide variety of ways.

There are pockets of Christian faith,
that still have not accepted

the role of modern medicine
in the healing process.

I think that's unfortunate.

When you stop to think
that one of the gifts
God shared with us at creation/
was God's own ability to be creative,/
and you realize that most of our modern
healthcare technology and skill/
is a result of our utilizing
that gift of creativity/
to continually advance
our understanding of the human body,/
our understanding of diseases/
and our development of effective
vaccines and
procedures and
surgeries
to combat the things
that destroy human health, /
then I have no difficulty at all
seeing the hand of God
working through the hands of surgeons
and doctors
and nurses
and technicians
and everyone else
involved in the modern health care system.

So when we think about
the healing ministry of Jesus,
and how the church was inspired by him

to become deeply involved in healthcare,
have we not done
even greater things than Jesus did?

By all means we have.
And Jesus is the first
to have cheered us on in these efforts.
It is what he intended.

RAISING WOMEN TO A NEW LEVEL

Or think about how Jesus treated women.

Today, through a series of
misinterpretations and misapplications
of Scripture by some,
the Christianity in the popular mind
is perceived by many
as being anti-women.

But if one truly understands
the ministry of Jesus
around the issue of the treatment of women
nothing could be farther from the truth.

In the culture in which Jesus lived,
women were considered
property, chattel.

A woman's role was so limited,
and her value to society was so low,
the birth of a baby girl
was not usually greeted with joy.

In Roman society baby girls were often
thrown out on to the dung heap
to die of exposure
because they were so undervalued
in Roman society.

Even in Jewish society in Jesus' day
women were considered
the property of their fathers
and title of ownership, so to speak,
was transferred from a woman's father
to her husband at her marriage.

Did you ever realize that was the purpose
of the phrase in traditional wedding liturgies:
"Who gives this woman to this man?"

That phrase signified a transfer of property.

Widows, by and large,
were not permitted to inherit
their husband's property.
It went instead to her husband's relatives.

At least
in the progressive Jewish culture
of that time,
the relatives of the deceased husband
were required to take on
the care of his widow and children.

That was a large step above the culture
that was around the Jewish people at that time.

In the event of adultery,
it was always the woman
who was punished,
often by being stoned to death.

The men got off Scott free.

I could go on listing the abuses to women
that were rampant in the world
in which Jesus lived.

But the more important point to make
is that to Jesus,
women were not property.

They were people.
People of infinite worth.
People with gifts and graces
for, among other things, the life of ministry.

Jesus entrusted himself
to the care of women
at the most strategic points of his life.

As opposition to him
and his ministry was building,
he allowed a woman
to wash his feet with her tears,
wipe them with her hair,
and anoint them with expensive perfume
when he was a guest in the home of a Pharisee.

He stopped at the home of
Mary and Martha

on his way to Jerusalem
just days before his crucifixion.

And most astounding of all,
the risen Jesus appeared first to women.

It is often argued by Christian scholars,
that if the church had made up
the story about the resurrection,
they would never have presented it
in a way where its authenticity
hung on the word of a woman.

In Jesus' day the testimony of women
was not admissible in legal proceedings.

They were not considered
reliable witnesses.

So to have the first reports
of the resurrection
coming from the lips of a woman,
by itself invited skepticism
on the part of the people of that day.

But Jesus forever honored womankind
by appearing to the Mary Magdalene first,
and entrusting to her
the announcement to the world
of his resurrection.

Now we must be honest,
and confess that the church
has frequently failed to live up to

the new status that Jesus gave to women.

Too often the church has held women back.

For too long even our own traditions
in the Methodist church
held women back from fully ordained ministry
and from serving in the episcopacy.

Some denominations still bar women
from serving as ordained pastors,
or even as leaders in the local church.

There still exists in some corners
of Christendom pockets of chauvinism
with respect to the treatment of women.

In some narrow Christian traditions
a woman's value is still tightly tied to
having babies and homemaking
and, in this view, careers beyond the home
are viewed as sinful.

In other Christian traditions,
women are not allowed to teach
or serve in positions
of significant leadership.

We still have a long way to go
with respect to the treatment of women
in the church,
in our culture,
and certainly in the world.

But among the world's great religions,
Christianity, at its best,
has historically been a vanguard
in demanding that the world
catch up with Jesus
with respect to the treatment of women.

EXTENDING JESUS' CONCERN FOR THE POOR

Or take Jesus concern for the poor.

The Roman world
had no concern for the poor.

The poor were enslaved by the Empire
and forced to work
for the leisure and the pleasure
class.
of the ruling class.

Or they were thrown into battle
along the front lines
as fodder for slaughter.

Or they were captured and
carted off into exile
so that the resources
of the land where they lived
could be plundered by the conquerors.

Or they were herded into leper colonies
where they were left to die alone.

They were perceived by ancient society
as less than human,
and therefore treated
in any way that society
chose to treat them.

Jesus changed that.

It was Jesus who said

*"Are not five sparrows
sold for two pennies^[a]?
Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.
Indeed, the very hairs of your head
are all numbered.
Don't be afraid;
you are worth more than many sparrows."
(Luke 12:6-7)*

It was Jesus who set a new,
higher level of concern for strangers
by his critique of the
callous priest and Levite
in the parable of the good Samaritan.

They walked,
unconcerned and unresponsive,
by a man left to die
by the side of the road by robbers.

In Jesus' parable,
it was not the chosen people of God
who showed kindness
to the victim of a brutal robbery,
but a lowly Samaritan

who was considered an outsider
by God's chosen people—
a Samaritan who came along
and rescued the man
and provided for his restoration to health.

It was Jesus who said if you have two cloaks
give one to someone who has no cloak.

It was Jesus who said when you have cared
for the least of these my brethren,
visiting the imprisoned,
sheltering the homeless,
feeding the hungry,
caring for the sick,
clothing the naked,
you have done these things
as though you had done them to me.

Today in our country
one of our greatest struggles
is over the expansive nature
of our social safety net,
our entitlements:
Welfare
Social Security
Medicare
Medicaid
Food stamps
and now the Affordable Care Act.

We have a great and I think legitimate concern
about how all of these programs
are going to be funded in the future

without bankrupting the country.

The predictions are dire.

We in the general public
don't see many politicians
on either side of the aisle
getting very serious
about confronting our national debt
or our escalating deficit spending.

A day of financial reckoning
certainly is coming,
and it will not be pretty.

But what is often lost
in the present day controversies,
is the fact that in the late 18th century
and all of the 19th century
and part of the early 20th century,
the impulse to care for the poor
arose out of socially progressive
Evangelical Christianity.

Donald Dayton has written a book called
Discovering An Evangelical Heritage.

In it he traces the Evangelical roots
of many of our greatest efforts/
to right social wrongs.

For example, Dayton says
that the abolitionist Theodore Weld,
who was converted under the ministry

of the great evangelist Charles G. Finney,/
showed what a response
to the radical call of Christ means/
as he strove to right
social injustice and inequity
during his time in the days of slavery.

Likewise, Dayton points out
that Catherine Booth,
co-founder with her husband William
of the Salvation Army, and an ardent feminist,
offers a powerful testimony
to the **impact** that Christian witness/
can and should have upon society.

The Salvation Army,
which has done an historic work
of caring for the poor
was born out of the Methodist Church.

In his day, John Wesley worked hard
to encourage and support
the development of labor unions in Britain
to protect the rights of workers
in the unrelenting and dangerous
factories and sweat shops
of the Industrial Revolution.

Free public education,
particularly in Britain and America,
was pioneered by the church.

The Sunday school movement

was begun by Robert Raikes
in 18th-century England,
and was designed to bring education
to children who six days a week
spent 12 and 14 hours a day,
laboring in the factories of Britain
with no access to education any other way.

Long before there was a
public welfare system of any kind
John Wesley structured his class meetings—
the small groups of Methodists
that met in people's homes—
to care for the needy within their group.

Each class meeting collected a weekly offering
and used those funds to help those in need.

To me, it would be almost unimaginable//
to think about what Western society
would be like today/
without this long-term, abiding influence
of the Christian church/
in the many areas where Jesus pioneered
new levels of concern for humanity.

EVEN GREATER THINGS THAN THESE

In so many areas, we have in fact
done greater things than Jesus did.

And I say it again,
Jesus has been cheering us on to do them.

And all of this is the result
of the risen Christ
having breathed on his disciples,
calming the chaos that was in their hearts,
filling them with the breath of life,
resuscitating their dead spirits
and then empowering them
with the same Holy Spirit
by which God had empowered him.

Today, the good news for you and me
is that the risen Jesus is still among us
and he wants to breathe on us too,
filling us with life,
resurrecting our dead spirits, and
empowering us with the Holy Spirit.

So, church, stand up,
and let the breath of Christ fall upon you
and fill you
and empower you
and let's go forth from this place
to do even greater things
than Jesus did.

And remember,
he is the first to cheer us on to do it,
and he is very pleased when we do.

Let's pray:

O risen Lord,
breathe on us, breathe on us, breathe on us.
Amen.