



# Jesus Breathes the Spirit

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explores the story of the risen Jesus breathing the Spirit on the disciples in John 20:19-31 and invites us to reflect on participating in God's creation.

“Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take . . . but by the moments that take our breath away.” These words attributed to Maya Angelou, the American poet, singer and civil rights activist, relate the experience of awe and wonder as being intimately connected with our breath and with fullness of life.

We can think of breathing as purely functional, of breath and breathing as movements: in and out, internal and external, inspiration and expiration. The process of breathing essential to all life on Earth features uniquely in the second part of John's resurrection story. There breathing is associated with the work of creation and the Holy Spirit.

## Jesus Breathed the Spirit on Them

Jesus “breathed on them [the fearful disciples locked in the room] and said to them: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:22). Jesus gives the Spirit to the disciples after he “hands over the Spirit” to the women and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:30). Several times

before these givings, in the farewell discourse, Jesus commissions the community through the power of the Holy Spirit to finish the works of God (Jn 14-17). By breathing the Spirit in, the disciples grow as a community for mission.

Jesus had promised to bring a recreating Spirit. The disciples are to be born of this wild, uncontrollable Spirit (Jn 3:3-8). The Greek for Spirit can mean wind, breath or spirit. Each is unpredictable — the wind that blows where it will is not seen or able to be grasped but is essential for life and has great power.

The word “breathed” is unique in the New Testament and is found only twice elsewhere in Scripture to describe God creating. In Genesis we read that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” and in doing this created the Earthling (*adam*) from the Earth (*ha'adam*) (2:7). The Book of Wisdom speaks of God “who breathed a living spirit into them” (15:11). In John, too, Jesus's breathing is connected with God's creating.

Before considering what Jesus is creating, we need to look at where he speaks the creating words. Jesus is not at the tomb nor with the first disciples but is instead with disciples in a house where “it was evening on that day, the first day of the week” (Jn 20:19). This evokes the day on which, from the earliest times to today, disciples gathered as a community.

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## Mission Community of Peace

The basis of God's mission in John is *shalom*, Jesus's peace. Whereas in Matthew Jesus gives the disciples his power and authority to baptise in the name of the Trinity (Mt 28:18-20), it is different in John. Jesus breathed on the disciples creating them into a new community. Through the Holy Spirit this community will carry on the work of Jesus, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" by "forgiving sin and holding fast in communion those who are thus reconciled to God" (Jn 20:23).

Consciousness of our breath and breathing can take us deeply into Jesus, the incarnation of God in the world God so loved. In the Book of Wisdom we find: "When I was born, I began to breathe the common air and fell upon the kindred earth" (7:3). All life in Earth – the community of life – shares the atmosphere.

## For Us Today

The process of breathing evolved about 3.77 billion years ago. Eventually plants which breathe through the pores in their leaves evolved over 470 million years ago. Living creatures which move air into and out of their lungs evolved about 395 million years ago. Then, breathing the common air in Earth our common home, modern humans emerged only about 100,000 years ago.

We latecomers are intimately connected with Earth. From earliest times Christian teachers have taught that God speaks to us through two books: the little book of scripture and the big book of creation. Pope Francis introduced the phrase "integral ecology" in *Laudato Si'*. The air of our common home is interconnected through atoms or subatomic particles between plants and living creatures and among species in ecological systems and networks. When the Australian bushfires raged, the air we breathed changed colour. The deforestation of the Amazon reminds us that each breath is fed to us by Earth – it is a natural resource but not an infinite resource. The airborne spread of Covid-19 reminds us that we all share the same air – we are not enclosed in our own hermetically sealed bubbles of personal space. Climate scientist James Renwick sees that some of the changes being forced on us because of Covid-19 give us insight into a cleaner world. Appeals to fly less and live lighter have been around for some time. Now people are being forced to change. In China there has been a dramatic drop in air pollution because of fewer cars and factories not running. In some places air pollution is down a quarter to a third and the sky is clearer.

## New Structure of Faith

Thomas, one of the twelve, "was not with them when Jesus came" (Jn 20:24). He does not doubt but declares firmly, "I will not believe." He refuses to believe. There is a new structure of faith. Thomas is one of the generations who are called to believe, not through their actual experience of the resurrection of Jesus, but through the testimony of others – the

community of the Church. We are like Thomas when we refuse to believe and act.

With the myriad threats to our environment and well-being, we are perhaps better placed than ever to understand the significance of life-sustaining breath, to believe, to participate in the mission of God. When Jesus breathes on the disciples his is – literally – the same air we breathe. Jesus breathes out a gift – the Spirit – and as disciples we breathe in. Jesus's breathing is intentional and life giving. "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who will come after us, to children who are growing up?" Pope Francis asks in his video message (<https://laudatosiweek.org/>). "Motivated by this question", he says, "I would like to invite you to participate in *Laudato Si'* Week from 16-24 May 2020. It is a global campaign on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On the Care of Our Common Home*."

We who breathe in a culturally Christian, yet pluralistic country, became aware of our Muslim sisters and brothers and reached out to them. A year later we are hearing stories of the friendships created through this tragedy. We can be inspired to join this on-going work of community making through simple everyday acts of friendship and inclusion. So breath, crucial to individual life, is shared. When we inspire we become inspirited. Maya Angelou's words on how to measure life remind us to pause to treasure our moments of awe – the *breath-taking* moments when we become aware of our participation in God's creating. 🙌

Reading for 19 April, 2nd Sunday of Easter

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