

Sermon – April 14, 2024
“Life in His Name”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 20:19-31

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! It is the season of Eastertide and our praise for our risen Lord should be ever ready in our hearts and on our lips. Easter is not just the first Sunday after Lent. It is a season when Jesus appeared to his disciples that they might be witnesses to his resurrection. Throughout this season, we will look at some of those appearances and seek to grow in our own witness as we experience our risen Lord through the word of God. Thank you for a week off to rest, to be with some of our family, and to enjoy being a witness to a total eclipse of the sun. I will say that I thought I had experienced a total eclipse of the sun in my elementary school days in West Virginia, as I remember being out of school and the strange darkening of the sky as the eclipse passed. But, having now been through a total eclipse and experienced the darkened sun and the sudden return of light that comes as one moves out of the shadow, I realize my experience last week of being in the totality part of an eclipse was very different from what I recall experiencing as a youth. I was surprised with the response from

people around us in the community where our daughter lives as the sun darkened: car horns were blown, sirens sounded, and there were gunshots and fireworks, loud shouts, and clapping. I found myself praising God for the wonders of creation. For me the magnificent sight of the darkened sun became a time to praise God.

I think, though, that my joy at seeing the total eclipse of the sun pales in comparison to the joy of the disciples on the evening of the first day of the week when, in spite of locked doors, Jesus comes and stands among them and their fear of the Jews gives way to rejoicing. Jesus comes in his resurrected body, the first born of the dead, and tells them, "Peace with you." He shows the disciples his hands and side and, as they recognize Jesus, they rejoice at seeing the risen Lord. Our own response throughout Eastertide and always when we encounter the risen Lord, when we are filled with the peace that the resurrection of Jesus brings to our hearts, should be to praise God and rejoice. Whenever the knowledge that through Jesus we have been reconciled to God and peace is now present between us and our Father comes to our minds, we should be filled with joy.

Jesus had promised his disciples only a few days earlier as they reclined at the Last Supper that "a little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." And, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy."¹ With Jesus' appearance in the upper room, the disciples' mourning was transformed into rejoicing. We have walked through Eastertide before in our lives, but we have never walked through the days of Eastertide this time. May our hearts catch and this time forever hold onto the joy the disciples experienced at the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. May our hearts that began to experience joy with Mary at the tomb early on Easter morning now begin to burst with joy as we continue to witness the risen Lord and grow in our understanding of what it means that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! As we journey with the disciples through Eastertide this time, let the joy of the risen Lord fill our hearts and become a lasting outward expression of joy that has filled our hearts and is seen in our lives.

Notice what Jesus does in the house where the disciples had met. He again tells them, "Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Don't miss that Jesus sends out his disciples to complete the mission he began when he was with them on earth. Jesus' disciples are not to sit around and be joy-filled people as they bask together in the news of a risen Jesus. They have a job to do; they are sent out not only to continue Jesus' mission to all people, but to

complete that mission. Jesus sends out his disciples to the world so that the world may also hear the Good News that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We also, as disciples of Jesus, are sent out. As Jesus was sent by the Father, so we are sent by Jesus. Our mission does not lie within the closed doors of a church where we regularly gather for worship. Jesus sends those who believe in him out into the world to continue his mission to all people. I heard the testimony of a believer in Jesus a couple of weeks ago who shared that his early life was very difficult. His dad was not present, and his mother had become addicted to drugs and was not present or able to function as a parent in his life. He was out on the streets, asking for money in order to be able to eat. On the block where they lived was a church and he saw the people going into the building, but they never came and invited him to come with them. As an adult he knows that they were loving each other, enjoying meals and rich fellowship in and with a risen Lord, but they did not come outside the walls of the church and invite him to come in and be part of their fellowship. Yes, we are to come together, worship Jesus as our risen Lord and break bread in fellowship with each other, but Jesus sends us outside of the church walls to be his disciples, to love the fallen world, and to share the great good news of a risen Lord. Jesus' words to his disciples were "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." We, who believe in Jesus, are sent people. Easter people don't just have joy in their hearts. They have joy that takes or compels them to go outside of the house to spread that joy, to spread the Good News of Jesus with a fallen, broken, hurting world. Those in the world need someone to come and bring the light of Jesus into their lives. They need a disciple who is sent to them to come and love them as Jesus loves us.

In John's Gospel, Jesus does one more thing for those gathered in the upper room that evening. After he has sent them out, he breathes on them and tells them, "Receive Holy Spirit." We may recall that in a few more weeks we will celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of Holy Spirit on all people. So, what is going on here in John's Gospel with Jesus breathing on the disciples? Let me answer that question by pulling a thread through the Bible for us, but first let me point out that on the cross Jesus breathed his last, but here in the upper room he again breathes on his disciples. A risen resurrected Lord, the first born of the dead, a new creation, breathes on his disciples Holy Spirit. Only those who are alive breathe. And Jesus breathes on his disciples. They have been sent and now they have been enabled to go into Jesus' mission to all people. Let me pull this thread through our Bibles to help us grasp the idea of Jesus breathing on his disciples.

If you have your Bible with you, turn to Genesis 2:7. In the pew Bibles, it is on page 2 in the front section of the Bible. The context for the passage is creation, specifically creation of humanity. Let me read it for us this morning: “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”ⁱⁱ At the creation of humanity, God breathes the breath of life into humanity and life comes into the people of God’s creation. The first man, Adam, is given life through the breath of God. That which was but formed of dust becomes a living person created in the image of God and filled with the breath of God which brings life.

Now we will move in our Bibles to another creation story, this one found in the book of John. Turn in your Bibles to John chapter 1, verse 1. It is page 92 in the pew Bibles. Let me read the scripture: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the opening of John’s Gospel, we have another creation account, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Jesus will grow in the flesh and experience what we experience. He will breathe the air we breathe and will experience the world we experience in the flesh we know. Jesus knows our struggles as he also has lived in the flesh as we do. Jesus also responds to being sent by the Father. Sometime around the thirtieth year of his life he will step into the waters of baptism and be baptized by John the Baptist. As Jesus comes up out of those waters, the Spirit descends upon him. He is filled with the Spirit of God and his mission begins in full. And so, with the giving of the Spirit begins the sending of the beloved Son into the world as the Word made flesh to do the will of the Father.

Finally, we return to the house where the disciples are gathered with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Into this place comes a resurrected Jesus, the first born of the dead, the first to be resurrected. We have come to a new creation, a new moment in God’s plan for the salvation of all people. Jesus Christ appears in the upper room to his disciples, bringing them joy and peace, and then breathes on them, telling them to “Receive Holy Spirit.” Jesus is a new creation. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And as his disciples come to belief in the resurrection of Jesus, as they are transformed by the power of the resurrection, Jesus breathes on them, they receive Holy Spirit, and they are sent out by Jesus into the world to do the same for all who will believe in Jesus through them. As Jesus was filled with the Spirit at his baptism, so his disciples are, through Jesus’ breathing on them, filled with Holy Spirit. With the arrival of a new creation, the resurrected Jesus, all things are being made new through Christ. The in-breaking of the

kingdom of God that started with Jesus and seemed to end with his death now goes forth into the world through Spirit-filled disciples. The first born of the dead has come and sent out his disciples with the enabling power of Holy Spirit to continue his mission to all people. Jesus has filled his disciples so that they may go into the world and fill others with his Spirit. All things are being made new through a resurrected Jesus. One life at a time, as Jesus' disciples go out into the world and share the transforming love of Jesus, the mission of Jesus continues.

We might be thinking, "What does the breathing of Jesus in the upper room on the first day of the week mean to us today?" The answer is it means everything. Jesus' disciples did indeed go out into the world and continue his mission. They baptized with water, and Jesus continues to baptize with Holy Spirit. The breath of life enters into Jesus' followers today. We as Methodists believe Holy Spirit is given to a believer in baptism. In the Global Methodist Church, we pause after water baptism and place our hands on the persons we have baptized with water and pray for them to receive Holy Spirit. We, like Jesus' disciples, are sent people who are filled with Holy Spirit. If we lack Holy Spirit, then ask Jesus to breathe on us again so that we might be filled anew with Holy Spirit. Ask Jesus to enable us to be those who not only come together in great joy to worship Jesus our risen Lord, but to be people who go outside the walls of the church, find the lost we are sent to, and join with Jesus in his mission that is ongoing all around us in the inbreaking kingdom of God. If you would like to have someone lay hands on you and pray for you to receive Holy Spirit, if your heart is open to receive breath from Jesus, then come to the altar rail during the last hymn or after the service and let me pray for you to receive Holy Spirit. If your heart is stirred to go out and join Jesus in his mission to all people, if you feel in your heart this morning the calling of Jesus to go to the lost, if you have that stirring growing in your heart but yet lack something to allow you to go with Jesus into his mission, let me encourage you to respond to that stirring of your heart and come and let Jesus breathe on you that you might receive Holy Spirit so that you are clear that you have been given power to go with Jesus into his mission right here, right now. I am always willing to pray for anyone whose heart is stirred to receive a fresh outpouring of Holy Spirit to enable us to be those not only knowing a risen Lord but to be those filled with Holy Spirit who are out joining with Jesus in his mission. We are to be those who are filled with Holy Spirit and are leaving these comfortable pews inside the walls of this house of worship to go to those who are so lost, so broken, so hurting, so desperate, and so need Jesus' love and healing that they will listen to the love of a disciple of

Jesus who has followed him into his mission and has come to share with them the Good News that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Pray with me: Father, at creation you breathed your breath into us and gave us life. We confess that we turned from being those filled with your breath and have gone our own way. Jesus, we desire the joy the disciples experienced on the evening of the first day when you brought your peace to them and breathed on them. Come, Lord Jesus, and be present with us and breathe on us that we might “Receive Holy Spirit” and be those who go and continue your mission to all the world, right here, right now. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Go forth into Jesus’ mission taking peace to all people.

ⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3233). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. John 16:16 and 20

ⁱⁱ Ibid p33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3190). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, John 1:14