
Take a Breath

John 20:19-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 23, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am so glad to be with you today, on the Sunday After. In a lot of churches, it's the day you can count on a guest preacher, the sub-organist, and a lone soloist, because the choir, the regular organist, and the pastor all need of a day off. Not in Duke Chapel, clearly, but in a lot of places.

In my church, we call it Low Sunday because attendance is low, along with adrenaline. Sometimes you can find an Easter bulletin still tucked inside a hymnal, or a shriveled azalea blossom under your pew that fell from the flowered cross when the sexton took it out on Monday. Faithful Christians may say "The Lord is risen!" all year long, but on this Sunday in particular it can feel like he rose last week.

In some ways, it's a lot like other Weeks After: the week after the wedding, the graduation, the birth, the death. What now? What next? Things will never be the same, but how are they different exactly? *It's just too soon to tell.*

In other ways, the problem with the week after Easter is that things *aren't* all that different. After forty days of preparing for the life-altering reality of the resurrection, you're still slammed at work, still shaken by the headlines, still waking up in the middle of the night with more anxieties than alleluias. At least some of us are. Even if the world isn't different, shouldn't we be? Where is the peace that passes all understanding--the evidence of things not seen?

There aren't many Week After stories in the gospels. Mark is in such a hurry that he wraps things up with the empty tomb. Matthew adds a few lines about Jesus appearing to the disciples in the Galilee, commissioning them to carry on. Luke tells a great story about a stranger meeting up with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but that happens on the same day Jesus vanishes from his tomb, and the minute the disciples recognize the stranger, he's gone, carried up into heaven and out of their sight.

John is the only one who lingers on what it's like to be a disciple after Easter. He's the only one with a Week After story, about Jesus and a disciple called Didymus, the Twin--better known to most of us as Doubting Thomas, because he had some trust issues that the other disciples did not.

Or at least that's the allegation. If you think about it, he wasn't any less trusting than the rest of them. When Mary Magdalene ran home from the cemetery to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that Jesus wasn't in his tomb, they didn't believe her either. *They ran to see for themselves.* When Jesus came back that same night to the house where the disciples were hiding, they believed because *they saw him for themselves.*

The only reason Thomas got singled out was because he wasn't there. He didn't get to see anything for himself, which is why he had questions the others didn't have. They had evidence. He had

hearsay. He wasn't trying to decide whether or not he believed Jesus had risen from the dead. He was trying to decide whether or not he believed what the other disciples told him, and he decided he didn't—couldn't—until he saw for himself what they had seen. So his trust issue wasn't with Jesus. It was with his brothers.

Over the past couple of weeks I asked some people who know the Thomas story what they think about him (it takes a village to make a sermon) and they all said the same thing: they know they're supposed to disapprove of him but they don't. They like his honesty. They know where he's coming from. They're actually *grateful* for him, because he's their proof that even people who were *right there* had trouble believing that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Like the other disciples, Thomas had heard Jesus' best sermons (sometimes more than once). He knew how far Jesus could walk in a day and what he liked for supper. He had witnessed the healings, the feedings, the raising of Lazarus. Thomas had even heard Jesus predict his own death, though nothing had prepared him for the brutality of it. Afterwards, Thomas was as ruined as the rest of them by what had happened. Then he was as baffled as the rest of them when Mary came home from the cemetery for the second time and said *she* had seen the Lord.

After that, Thomas became the missing disciple, the one who wasn't there. He wasn't there in the house with the others that night, wasn't there when Jesus came and stood among them, wasn't there when he gave them his peace, showed them his wounds, gave them power over sin, and bid them receive the Holy Spirit—basically everything he had to bring his little church back to life.

Before they saw him, all they had been able to see was the end of them. That locked up house was the end of the line for them, the end of the vision they had walked away from all other visions of their lives to serve. They had the breath knocked out of them, the life. They could not remember how to breathe.

If you or anyone you love has ever had a panic attack, you know what fear can do to you--the pounding heart, the flop sweat, the hair standing up all over you. It can make you think you're dying. Same thing if you've ever had the breath knocked out of you. Breathlessness can come at you in all kinds of ways—bad asthma, hard falls, heart failure, sudden violence. Who can forget Eric Garner in a chokehold one hour before he died, lying face down on a New York City sidewalk saying, "I can't breathe" eleven times? *God save us all*. However it happens, no breath means no life. There is no way forward without breath.

Before Jesus came to them, that is what had the disciples all locked up. Then he came to breathe on them and their fear turned to rejoicing. Somehow he knew that was what they needed more than anything. They had to be able to breathe before they could hear anything else. So he gave them divine CPR—gave them his own breath to bring them back to life—like God creating humankind all over again, only this time the breath came from the lungs of the Christ.

And Thomas wasn't there.

In the usual interpretation of the story, his problem was that he needed physical proof that God had raised Jesus from the dead. He was the holdout, the agnostic, the guy who wouldn't take anyone else's word for anything. He wanted to weigh the evidence for himself, and unless he was able to do that, Thomas said, he would not believe.

It reminds me of a movie that's playing in my hometown right now—*The Case for Christ*—in which an investigative journalist sets out to disprove the truth of Christianity and ends up becoming Christian instead. I haven't seen it, so I can't comment, but I have read *The Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer's Standpoint* and other books like that, which aim to convince readers by way of facts. It's certainly possible that was what Thomas was holding out for: facts. If he could have taken a DNA sample from Jesus' side, he would have, and he wouldn't have committed himself one way or the other until the results were in.

But if you listen to what he says, another possibility opens up. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,” Thomas says, “and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” It's the wounds he wants to see, not the face. He wants to touch the places where the Jesus he knew so well was hurt, where the spear went into his side even after he was dead.

So here's the other possibility: what if Thomas isn't holding out for proof that Jesus came *back* from all of that? What if he is holding out for proof that Jesus hasn't come back *divorced* from all of that? What if he needs to see for himself that the risen one is the same one who died—who has not come back all healed up and good as new but who has returned to his friends with visible evidence that he will never leave what is most human about him behind?

If that's a possibility, then Thomas isn't looking for *physical* proof of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He is looking for *existential* proof that the one whom God has raised up is the same one who was damaged beyond all human repair. He is looking for evidence that this Messiah knows everything there is to know about the worst kind of breathlessness and will never discount it, neither here nor in the hereafter. Otherwise, what should Thomas believe? That Jesus' new life in God has nothing to do with his old one? That faith means seeing the wounded world as a passing illusion?

Thomas wasn't having it. He wanted to see the marks on Jesus' body. He wanted to reach out his real hand and touch Jesus' real wounds. Only then would he believe that it mattered, that Jesus' resurrected life meant something for every life, no matter how hurt and scared.¹

Many years ago now, I and about three hundred other people attended a baptism at which Desmond Tutu, the retired archbishop of Capetown, presided. It was an impromptu thing, arranged at the last minute during a conference we were all attending in the mountains of North Carolina. Tutu had completely wooed us by then—first, by showing up in an orange dashiki, baggy shorts, and plastic flip flops; and second, by giggling a lot—this Nobel Peace Prize winner, who had come through hell on earth in South Africa with his ability to laugh intact.

The way I remember it, someone in the audience knew a family who had just welcomed a baby with Down syndrome into the world. They wanted their baby baptized, but they didn't belong to a church. So the person in the audience—their obstetrician, maybe?—asked Archbishop Tutu if he would do it and he said yes, on the condition that all of us who were there could serve as witnesses. That way, when it came time to ask the question about whether everyone present would support this child in his new life in Christ, the baby and his family would hear more than three hundred people shouting, “We will!”

¹ I am grateful to Paul Duke for his commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Gospels--John, Volume 2*, ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 329.

So that's how it happened. On Sunday we gathered in the auditorium for the service. There was a makeshift baptismal font set up on the stage, with a pitcher of water on a table beside it. The place looked as nice as the auditorium at a camp conference center can look, which isn't saying much—but it didn't matter, since the Archbishop only had eyes for that baby. Before he invited the family to come forward, he poured the water into the font. Then he prayed over it in his native language, Xhosa, which has lots of tongue clicks in it.

Next he did something I have never seen anyone else do before or since. He leaned over the water and blew on it—once this way, and once that way--like he had all the time in the world. He breathed the sign of the cross on the water, and then he invited the family to walk through the sea on dry ground with their baby in their arms.

It was the evidence of things not seen.

It was a moment full of the peace that passes all understanding.

Did the family come through to the other side with their wounds intact? Of course they did, in the midst of much rejoicing.

One of my favorite teachers says that if you are still breathing, there is more right with you than wrong with you. Thomas put it more forcefully, once he had seen the marks on Jesus' body for himself. "My Lord and my God!" he said, and he wasn't the missing disciple anymore. Thomas was back—a week late, but back--and Jesus didn't seem to mind coming back for him alone.

So take a breath, you faithful ones, still here after all these years—the Week After, the Week After that, and all the weeks to come. Blessed are you who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe.

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed.

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