

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Living Breathing Church

John 20:19-23

"Come as you are. Stay in your car." That was the message on the church sign of another congregation here in our community. It was an advertisement for drive-in worship. During the COVID-19 crisis, congregations have adopted a variety of innovative methods to bring their members together for church services, including having worshipers turn into the church parking lot, pull up a respectable distance from the next car, and tune into their radio to hear the pastor speak from an outdoor pulpit. If you feel like saying amen during the sermon, just honk your horn. I read of one pastor whose pulpit was about 25 feet off the ground on a scissor lift. He jokingly told a reporter, "It's not what I had in mind when I accepted a higher calling."¹

Pastors and their congregations are following the call of Christ into new territory during the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to restricting traditional ways of doing church, the pandemic has stimulated fresh strategies for worship and witness. Drive-in worship, drive-through confessions, livestreamed liturgy, online Bible study, and virtual prayer groups have emerged all over the place as alternative ways of gathering in the name of Christ.

But being the church isn't just about gathering. It's also about going. Going forth to spread the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. On Easter Sunday, a small group of disciples from Greater Brook Road Baptist Church gathered in front of the Canterbury Rehabilitation and Health Center in Henrico, Virginia. As of Good Friday, the death toll at the facility had climbed to 40 residents. Another 100 people at the center had tested positive for COVID-19. A handful of folks from the Greater Brook congregation stood outside the facility, singing and praying as a way of encouraging the residents and staff. Pastor Grace Tolliver said, "They are locked in, and they can't come out. But we can come to them, and offer them some hope, offer them some encouragement."²

In today's text from John, the disciples are the ones on the inside rather than the outside. And they could certainly use a good dose of hope. True, they've heard Mary Magdalene's report about seeing the Lord, and perhaps also the experiences of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. But it sounds like they haven't put much confidence in these testimonies to resurrection. They're still cynical and confused. The dominant mood in the room is fear. The disciples are hunkered down, worried that what happened to Jesus might happen to them as well. The doors are locked. The security cameras are on. This is no time to be outside, in public. The goal is simply to hold on and hold out until the risk level has dropped. In short, the disciples are operating under a self-imposed stay-at-home policy.

But the risen Jesus operates under no such restrictions. He has complete freedom of movement. He comes and goes as he pleases, walls or no walls. On Easter evening, he appears among his followers and repeats a greeting that he had used countless times before. But now, it took on greater depth. "Peace be with you!" Then Jesus showed them the wounds that made possible their healing, and the healing of the world. He proceeded to give his disciples a commission to spread that peace, forgiveness, and wholeness, not by

their own power but by the power of the Spirit. And in this case, Jesus didn't give them the Spirit by laying hands on them, or simply by speaking a few words. There was more to it. In addition to what he said to them, Jesus also breathed on them.

Thankfully this scene didn't play out under our current circumstances. If that were the case, the last thing the disciples need is Jesus going around breathing on them, especially without wearing a mask. But thankfully COVID-19 isn't an issue in today's text. Instead, Jesus' followers face a different kind of threat. They're infected with fear. It's keeping them from moving forward into active participation in the ongoing mission of Jesus. So Jesus shows up to give them a good dose of reconciliation, and an injection of hope. The disciples' future doesn't lie within the four walls where they've fortified themselves. Their future in the ministry of Jesus is out there in the world where Jesus is on the move. In order to go public with the gospel, what the disciples need, more than anything else, is divine power, the breath of life.

The coronavirus attacks the human body by working its way down the respiratory tract, where it can cause the lungs to become inflamed, making it hard to breathe. In some cases, this shortness of breath can develop into acute respiratory distress syndrome, requiring the help of a ventilator. As fluid collects in the lungs, this can make it hard for the blood to supply the organs with enough oxygen, causing them to shut down and stop working.

I share that medical summary with you not because I'm any kind of expert on infectious diseases, but as a reminder that COVID-19 does its destructive, and sometimes deadly, work by attacking our ability to breathe. Breath sustains life. In one sense, breath is life. So when Jesus commissioned his fearful followers, he also "breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (v. 22). This is the only place in the New Testament where the verb "to breath" occurs. It evokes the description of God breathing the breath of life into the first human in Genesis 2:7. Jesus' breathing on his disciples signifies a new creation. In other words, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God is at work remaking the world that was lost in sin, darkness, and death. And those who believe in Jesus receive new life, resurrection life, sustained by the breath called the Holy Spirit.

The hymn "Breathe on Me Breath of God" opens with, "Breath on me, Breath of God, / fill me with life anew, / that I may love the way you love, / and do what you would do." These words are a prayer for renewal by God's Spirit, a kind of renewal that gets expressed in a life of love, empowered by an intimate bond with God. The life and love originate in God, not the believer. The believer, in his or her life, simply becomes the visible manifestation of God's life-giving power, the power to raise the dead.

In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that wouldn't start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave his car running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life.

For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting the power to work.³

As we navigate our way through the coronavirus pandemic, maybe part of what will happen is that we'll reconnect with the Holy Spirit as the source of power for our mission and ministry as a congregation. When things in our church are running normally and operating pretty smoothly, as they were up until mid-March, it's easy to take for granted the source of our life together. We're prone to slip into self-reliance and complacency, thinking that all we have is of our own doing. But today's story of what happened on that first Easter evening disrupts our sense of self-sufficiency and reminds us that who we are and what we do as Grace Baptist Church comes from a source outside of ourselves, namely, the Holy Spirit. We're totally dependent upon the Spirit for our existence and mission. As one preacher William Willimon has put it, "Without the Spirit, we're as good as dead."⁴

There's a beautiful tapestry in England called the Bayeux Tapestry. It records the events from a great campaign when the Norman armies successfully invaded England. One of its scenes depicts a column of Norman soldiers on horseback. They're followed by the bishop of Bayeux, who is busy poking the last man with a large stick. The caption to this scene reads: "Bishop Odo comforts the soldiers."⁵ Not necessarily the kind of image that comes to mind when we think about comfort and encouragement. But sometimes, that's what being encouraged means. It means the Holy Spirit, giving us courage in the face of fear, urging us on to greater things, things beyond the safe confines of life inside the church. Preacher David Bartlett has rightly pointed out, "We sing 'A Mighty Fortress is our God,' but what we mean is 'A Mighty Fortress is our Church.'"⁶

These days we're outside the walls of our congregational fortress. But now we're inside the walls of another fortress, our own homes. In the midst of missing our church dwelling, and being confined to our domestic dwelling, maybe we can open ourselves to the ways that Jesus is coming to us, right where we are, to breathe new life into us. He's not waiting until the return of more "normal" circumstances, whatever that ends up looking like. He's not putting his mission on pause until we're out and about again, resuming more of our regular routine. No, Jesus is showing up now, in the world, in your space, in the church's space, to do things beyond what we may expect or anticipate.

At the beginning of this sermon, I spoke about some of the ways that churches are adjusting and innovating in order to gather as disciples. More Christians are now worshiping, praying, giving, sharing Scripture, and listening to the word of God online than ever before. There has been an explosion of online evangelism, with people turning to the Lord who previously might never have been very concerned about spiritual matters. One magazine article captured developments well with the title, "When God Closes a Church Door, He Opens a Browser Window."⁷

Now this doesn't mean that cyberspace is the only place where Jesus is appearing these days. Believers who don't spend much time online are also thinking about, praying about, and acting upon the ways that the Lord is challenging them or prompting them to turn outward toward the needs of others, the needs of our nation, and the needs of our world. They're offering their time, their money, their talents, their experience, and other resources to connect with others and contribute to the greater good. And all of us can look right around us at the people in our own households, paying attention to the quality and health of our family life, instead of just taking the gift of family for granted. So remember to look close to home and far from home, and places in between, to see where and how Jesus is commissioning you into kingdom work during this uncertain and fearful time. I know it's harder to feel like a sent person when you can't really go anywhere. But the place where

you are for now, day by day, is also territory ripe for mission, a place where your work and witness make a difference.

Lots of doors are closed right now. But today's text reminds us that closed doors are no obstacle to the risen Jesus. He's still showing up and blessing his followers with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the good news is that though we may be confined, the Holy Spirit is not. The Spirit is still in the business of creating, making new, and giving life. So let's be receptive to how Jesus is presently breathing life into us. Let's be open to how the Spirit is working in fresh, innovative ways in the church and in our lives.

¹ Andrew R. Chow, "'Come As You Are in the Family Car.' Drive-In Church Services Are Taking Off During the Coronavirus Pandemic." TIME website. March 28, 2020. Accessed April 16, 2020 <<https://time.com/5811387/drive-in-church-coronavirus/>>.

² "People Sing, Pray Outside COVID-19-Afflicted Henrico Nursing Home." WTVR website. April 12, 2020. Accessed April 16, 2020 <<https://www.wtvr.com/news/coronavirus/people-sing-pray-outside-covid-19-afflicted-henrico-nursing-home>>.

³ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 182.

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April, May, June 1994) 33.

⁵ Alister McGrath, *"I Believe": Exploring the Apostles' Creed* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 81.

⁶ Quoted by Jaime Clark-Soles. Working Preacher website. Accessed April 18, 2020 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3222>.

⁷ Kate Shellnutt, in "Gleanings." Christianity Today website. March 19, 2020. Accessed April 18, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/online-church-attendance-covid-19-streaming-video-app.html>>.