

“Breath”

Sermon from Mark 16:1-8

Given Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. Very early on the first day of the week, the sun was just coming up, they come to the tomb.

On their way they were asking one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But when they looked up, they see that the stone has already been rolled away.

It was a huge stone.

The women went into the tomb and they saw a young man, sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe. They were alarmed.

The man says: “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus, from Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”

*So they went out and fled from the tomb.
For terror and amazement had seized them.
And they said nothing.*

Not a thing to anyone.

For they were afraid.

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I've never had to run from anything out of fear. I know this makes me lucky.

Have you noticed what happens to your breath when you are afraid? It gets shallower and faster. We gasp to get a little more oxygen in. When we're scared, because of that rhythm, because of the speed, and the gasping, we're inhaling more. And we make better decisions when we're inhaling. We remember more when we're inhaling. This breathing that seems rushed, panicked, that seems no good, like we *should* slow it down - that's our body's adaptive response to danger. That's our breath taking care of us.

When we feel safe, we can slow down our breathing. We can take in more air. We can settle into a moment, become more present. We can fall into the rhythmic pattern of those around us. That's our breath taking care of us, too.

Maybe we can even experience what the French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called "the breathing together of all things" - the awareness of the deep connections that tie us, one to another, and each to all the world.

It's hard to breathe like that during a war.

A month ago, a report came from Ukraine saying because of constant attacks, residents of Kyiv were having trouble breathing. Too much smoke in the air. When George Floyd was murdered two years ago in Minneapolis, his cry - that he couldn't breathe - was taken up by those around the country and around the world that know the feeling of being suffocated by state-sanctioned, racist oppression. Just since we gathered last Sunday, there have been twelve mass shootings in the United States. Does that statistic take your breath away?

It is hard to breathe together with all things when you're fighting for your own air.

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A gospel story is not a war story.

Not entirely.

But what Tim O'Brien tells us about war stories might also hold true for gospel stories. All of the gospels, anyway, come to us from the rubble of the First Jewish Revolt. That must matter.

In *The Things They Carried*, his book about American soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War, O'Brien writes that in war, "There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths are no longer true. ... You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is an overwhelming ambiguity. You lose your sense of the

definite, hence your sense of truth itself. And therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story, nothing is ever absolutely true."

"In a true war story," he writes, "if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling it. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh.'"

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What is "oh" but a breath?

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Maybe the women in our story had endured too many heartbreaks, and couldn't stand another. Maybe they had survived too many dangers, and couldn't face another. Whatever the reason, they can't be there - these women who had been with Jesus through the very end - through what they thought was the very end - they hear this story and they can't stay at the tomb.

We don't know that they leave each other. We only know that they leave. And they keep quiet. And somehow, sometime after this, we get the story.

So it's tempting to fill in the blanks. It's easy to say, "They must talk, they obviously talk, eventually, because how else would we get the story?" But that's a question for another day. And

we'll ask that question, and tell those stories, in the weeks to come. For today, we're here, in the oldest and earliest Easter story, and it tells us that the very first people to witness the good news of the resurrection, the very first people to hear the end of this war story, they say: "Oh."

And then they run away. In the earliest telling of it, fear and silence rule this day.

And I think it's important to stay with that. The other gospels clean it up and the songs we sing resolve it and though there's terror and lament on Good Friday, by the time we arrive at today we're supposed to somehow pretend that all fear has been banished and all silence breaks forth in bells and rejoicing and here's the thing: the gospel of Mark isn't interested in pretending. These women do not rush to resolution. They come to the tomb, expecting not a miracle but a corpse, and when that's not what they find, they say, "Oh."

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What if the good news, for now, is just that we're given something to wonder about? What if the good news, in this moment, is just that the end... might not be? What if the good news is that you are breathing, and when you inhale, somehow you take in a bit of the same air that these women were taking in, in such short gasps, as they ran from the tomb, somehow the same air that Jesus breathed again, even after they thought he'd breathed his last?

What if the good news is the breathing together of all things? Not only ours with all that has been, but ours with all that will be - and not just ours, but all that has been with all that will be. Our breath not only tethers us to the past, it weaves us into the future. And there is no clarity. And everything swirls. Oh.

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Yesterday we invited a yoga teacher to come to the Gathering Room, and she led a group in a practice and she talked to us about how breathing itself is a lot like Lent: this letting in, and letting go, and the letting go has to happen so that the letting in can happen again. She taught us a forceful way of breathing out to make room for something new, something more to come in.

And this is the end of Lent. The end of all of that saying no, all of that forceful breathing out. And what if what we have made space for these past few months is the chance to breathe deeply now, to say yes to the breathing together of all things - all of the lament and all of the terror that is still out there, but also all the celebration and all of the rejoicing that is on its way, all of the ambiguity of this moment right now, but all of the love that is now and always in the air here also. Amen.