

**John 14: 15-17; 20: 19-22 “Never Out of Breath” Rev. Janet Chapman 6/8/25**

**I will never forget bringing my Texas youth group to ski in Colorado. We headed to Keystone as it was great for newbies. Texas youth have little opportunity to become experienced skiers, cattle rustlers maybe, mountain skiers not so much. Spending my high school years in Boise, I, on the other hand, considered myself a decent skier, so it was on me, plus the lessons they took, to try and guide the group through the green slopes. I never fit the bill in high school for being the athletic type but skiing was something I could manage and thus I relished the idea of being the expert on the trip. However, I remember taking a few kids higher up in elevation to a slightly more difficult trail assuring them I would be right by their side the whole time. I had forgotten about the differences in elevation, even starting at 5000 feet in the Denver basin... the more you go up the Rockies, the thinner the air gets. As we got off the ski lift, I tried to take a deep breath before heading down, but gasped and felt faint. Then the world went blank. I woke up to kids all staring down at me in disbelief and concern while ski patrol was waving smelling salts under my nose. Defeated and winded, I tried to get up but the medic insisted I stay down. Much to my chagrin and worry over my youth, the medic wouldn't let me ski down; instead putting me on the lift and making me promise to stay off the higher slopes. The kids never let me live that down. Just one more time where the infamous proverb, “Pride goeth before the fall,” proved true. On this day when we celebrate the breath of God bringing the church to life, I am in awe that God never seems to run out of breath, never gets winded. We, in the year 2025, are similar to the community of John's Gospel. We are exhausted by the terrors of the world, we are winded by the non-stop tensions which divide our nation, we are uncertain how to find our way amidst all the confusion and conflict. The author John understands that struggle and he knew, more than any other Gospel writer, that Jesus' resurrection also meant his departure. At a certain point, the newbies were going to have to navigate the path on their own, to weather the high elevation of conflict, and learn to breathe in a whole new way. John gives us 12 chapters which tell of Jesus' public ministry and then spends the next 9 chapters in the process of saying**

farewell. There is a farewell meal, farewell discourses, a farewell prayer, and then the final farewell. The emotion is deep and real as Jesus says in chapter 14: “Let not your hearts be troubled... In my Father’s house are many rooms. I go there to prepare a place for you.” What is Jesus talking about? Fred Craddock says the disciples are like children sitting on the floor playing with their toys when suddenly they look up to discover that their parents are putting on coats and hats. The three questions that emerge are always the same: “Where are you going? Can we go? Who will stay with us?” “Where am I going? I’m going to my Father and your Father.” “Can we go?” “Where I am going you cannot go now. You can go later.” “Then who will stay with us?” “I will ask and the Father will send the Spirit and {the Spirit of Truth} will be with you.”

We jump to chapter 20 and the disciples are huddling behind locked doors, shut up tight on Easter evening. Easter was not joyous in that moment because danger still lurked nearby – the elevation of violence which had been unleashed on an innocent man was terrifying. Where was justice? Who would be next? The doors were shut for safety, shut in fear, shut in order to hide. Almost a ludicrous picture, the followers of Jesus are shut behind closed doors, hoping no one would notice, or disturb, or harm them. Then vs. 19 says, “Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” He showed them his hands and side, then repeating his blessing of peace, he gave them a send-off and breathed on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In the Bible, the notion of “breath” is the same word as “spirit.” Jesus gave them spirit. He performed artificial respiration on his defeated and winded followers. He gave them the unexpected gift of God’s energy which surged with the power of life. It was in distinct contrast to the lifeless charade of the government, the empire of that day, that only knew about violence and control, nothing about giving life. The reality is that we, like most life on this planet, choke or suffocate quickly if breath is not given; we faint if the air is too thin for us to inhale. Our existence is completely and utterly dependent upon our breath which isn’t coincidental when you consider our Creator. God and life-giving breath are so intrinsically connected that some Jewish scholars believe that the consonants used in the spelling of Yahweh, that is YHWH, are the very

few letters that, when spoken, do not allow us to close our mouths around them, or even significantly use our lips or tongue. In fact, the consonants of YHWH are very likely a brilliant attempt to replicate human breathing. Let me explain by having you try something. Say Yah with me – Yah. It is spoken by us inhaling our breath, not ever closing our mouth. Yah. Now say weh with me – weh. This is spoken by exhaling our breath, again not ever closing our mouth. Weh – our lips don't touch. Because you can never put a period or closure on God's present activity. God's name of Yah-weh is one more constant example to show us God is as close to us as our very breath. From the moment we are born, God is as accessible to us as the very air of life, and no religion, church, or society will ever be able to portion that out, control it, or say who gets it and who doesn't. In John 20, verse 23, right after the end of our text, Walter Brueggeman points out that the giver of life-sustaining breath, that medic with smelling salts to awaken the people, says, "I now give you the power to forgive sin." Christ tells his followers, "I am recruiting you for the forgiveness business. I charge you with healing, transformation, and reconciliation." It was then, as it is today, a hard job for the church, this forgiveness business. This is because in our society there is no free lunch, no open hand, no breaking of the vicious cycles of fear, failure, pride, and retaliation. But with the words of peace spoken once more, he gives the church spirit, he calls them to a ministry of forgiveness. Christ gave them breath; but he also took their breath away with such a mandate. They are challenged, as we are, to learn how to forgive even when everything inside of us rebels. The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared humanity to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. "The colder it gets outside, the more we draw together for warmth, but the closer we get, the more we hurt each other with our sharp quills. In the lonely night of earth's winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness." God encourages forgiveness for the pokes we receive in order that we can unite together and stay warm. With a blessing of peace, a commissioning, an infusion of breath, and a challenge to practice forgiveness, Christ

lays the early foundation for his church, a prequel to the day of Pentecost and the official birth of Christ's church.

The sequel comes on the Jewish celebration of Pentecost in Acts 2. A group of followers hear a sound from heaven like a fierce wind which filled the place and they see what looks like flames of fire alighting on each one's head. Then they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. Again, a world of life was birthed in the midst of the destructiveness of the empire, to inspire, to in-Spirit those who were winded and defeated. Every page in the book of Acts is the account of that breathed-on church battling the influences of greed, power, and pride. But those accounts are only the beginning of the church. Time after time, authorities of oppressive empires have tried to stop the church, to silence or intimidate or imprison the church, but time after time, the church rises up, takes a deep cleansing breath, and refuses the disciplines of the empire because we are an unfinished church. As a church which is still evolving, we are challenged with the quandary, do we give into despair as if the world is closed shut, or do we lean into hope because the world is still breathing with the healing, life-giving powers of the Holy Spirit. As a church which is not yet finished, do we remain in denial trying keep things as they are, or do we face the truth of our life and surrender it to God? Does society's me-first consumerism get the upper hand or will outrageous generosity prove to be the better route to heaven on earth? Since its inception, the church has had to decide if we will allow the Spirit within us to help us find the truth, forgive one another, and carry on Christ's mandate. This is because we are an unfinished church. We have heard the stories of the past and now are called to create new stories for the future. Like those before us, we are not sure we know the way, we are afraid to make mistakes and fail, but Christ calls us to move beyond our locked doors and make every day a new Pentecost, full of the promises and possibilities that God offers. Even though you and I may know what it is to fall winded and faint from the elevated struggles of our day, God will not cease to breathe upon us the Spirit of truth, grace, and renewed energy for the mission of Christ. Let us take a deep breath and live.