

The Breath of the Spirit

(Rev. Peggy McDonagh, April 19, 2020)

INTRODUCTION

You may recall that throughout the Lenten season, we freeze-framed moments of Jesus' last days, and we saw the depth of his passion, love, and courage. In John 20, we read that Jesus breathed on his followers so they might feel his spirit living in them. To me it seems as if Jesus was constantly breathing the spirit of God's love into them, yet they were unable to receive the spirit because of fear, confusion, and uncertainty.

The Easter season highlights the stories of Jesus' followers, finally receiving the spirit as they come to understand and appreciate the wisdom, compassion, and awareness that Jesus showered on them and others.

The story of resurrection is the story of inhaling the breath of Jesus and letting that breath break open our hearts, enabling us to see the world with new insight. In the spring, the sun, rain, melting snow, and increasing warmth breathe life into the earth, and eventually the earth breaks open, and summer arrives.

I believe that the message of resurrection is about how the breath of Jesus' spirit transforms our inner lives so that our external lives become visible signs of God's love.

David E. Elkins writes that spiritual resurrection reconnects us with the sacred and fills us with a born-again passion for life. Resurrection is about the heart awakening, awakening to a renewed way of being and acting in the world; awakening a consciousness that demonstrates our understanding of God's love, a love enabling us to burst forth into a new life that is rich with hope and optimism.

The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden." Despite the present reality in which we find ourselves, spring is still the right time for renewal and rejuvenation and an opportunity to soften. This day invite your heart to break open as you witness the coming of spring, see the signs of resurrection, and respond to the voice of renewal within you. In the weeks to come, break open your hearts and breathe in hope and optimism.

HOPE

Hope resides in the messages of Easter and spring. What does it mean to hold on to hope in a world overwhelmed by CoVid-19? At times it is difficult

to feel hopeful. Yet, the alternatives, fear, anxiety, pessimism, and despair are not helpful responses to the challenges of life.

In the Christian Testament, the word hope appears as an anchor that holds us fast to our faith no matter what the circumstances of life. Scripture suggests that God dwells within the inner sanctuary, within our hearts and this suggests that God is part of the messiness of life, no matter how daunting, miserable, or terrifying it may get. Hope is our spiritual lifeline to the strength of God within. We are never alone; God is with us.

Perhaps the Great Creator fashioned hope and placed it in nature so that we could learn from creation about the power and steadfastness of it. In his short story, *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean beautifully describes this.

“When I looked, I knew I might never again see so much of the earth so beautiful, the beautiful being something you know...added to something you see, a whole that is different from the sum of its parts. What I saw might have been just another winter scene, although an impressive one. But what I knew was that the earth underneath was alive and that by tomorrow, certainly by the day after, it would be all green again. So, what I saw because of what I knew was a kind of death with the marvelous [hope] of a less than a three-day resurrection.”

I suspect that Mary felt as if she had entered the darkness of hopelessness after Jesus’ death. Many people understand the hopelessness and misery that often accompany the death of a loved one, or illnesses that take away the health, cognition, and vitality, of a loved one or ourselves. These and other losses dramatically change our world from what it used to be. Yet, hope is often hidden within the murky depths of dark places.

In his article 'Cultivating Hope', John C. Maxwell writes, "In this age of what for many of us is an endurance test of stress and uncertainty, remember: all of life can be used by the divine to reconnect us with one another, creation, and the deepest part of who we are. So, 'in the face of overwhelming odds, we're left with only one option: to let hope guide us, support us, pave for us a way into each day no matter what it may bring.'" Let the power of hope break open your heart this spring.

OPTIMISM

There is an ancient proverb that says, “To everyone is given the key to heaven; the same key opens the gates of hell.”

Day by day, we exist in a reality in which we must self-isolate, distancing ourselves from loved ones, friends, and valued community. In

this same reality, many people have lost their jobs and financial security, and many businesses are facing bankruptcy. In such a reality, as the proverb said, we hold keys that open a gate to heaven or to hell.

Pessimism opens the gate to hell; optimism opens the gate to heaven.

It can be easy to fall victim to pessimism. This is even more true when we must be separated from loved ones and friends who are struggling with illnesses. Over the past month, those of us who have not lived through wars and depression, have found ourselves in a strangely altered life like nothing we have ever experienced before. We all know that this present life can certainly weigh us down, mire us in worry, stress, and sadness and the more we listen to the news, the more our spirits become saturated with concern and fear. This can lead to deep pessimism. But this is not a time for pessimism, rather it is a time for us to break open our hearts with optimism.

Optimism is defined as a disposition or tendency to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions. It is about expecting the most favorable outcome and helps us to believe that good ultimately will prevail. "Optimism is an admirable quality, one that can positively affect mental and physical health, because it interprets situations in the best possible light."

Poet Ashley Bertram wrote this poem entitled 'Optimism.'

Shimmering gleams of hope
Dance across the shadows.
They show no fear and neither do I.
I know there are only good dreams to come.
Whispering optimisms,
Tell me I'll prosper.
Their silent hints make me
Hopeful and rosy.

I've danced with the devil
On many occasions.
He's convinced me I'm home,
But I know that he's wrong.
I'll follow my heart and
Always see the sun.
For the shimmering gleams dance
Across the shadows of my soul.

My friends, resurrection is about seeing hope dance across the shadows of our lives, hearing optimisms that hint to better days, leaving us

hopeful and rosy. During these days may we courageously break open our hearts so that the shimmering gleams of hope and optimism can dance across the shadows of our souls. I conclude with a quote by Pastor Mark Harris, "If we believe in a creative power within each human heart that enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced resurrection." May this be so for us all.