

# St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

## Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2018, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

GOSPEL READING John 20:19-31

### REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

In 2004, Mel Gibson released a film he directed called 'The Passion of the Christ'. Even now the brutality of the movie sticks with me.

It was one of those films that I wasn't sure if I should encourage or discourage good faithful people from watching. All these years later I'm grateful for watching the violence and agonising pain because it has invited me into a deeper place every Easter since.

For me it is a strange gift that willingly enters into pain and darkness and the story of Jesus' crucifixion. But the other side of death is perhaps just as troubling and difficult to travel.

We hear from the gospel of John: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'*

It is hard for us to imagine the fear and grief of the disciples. We hear that they had locked themselves away for fear – perhaps fear they might be crucified like Jesus. But what is harder to plumb is that their lives are shattered. They have lost all hope. They have invested their livelihoods, their identity, their future, maybe even their ambitions in the one crucified. Their friend, rock, life is gone.

So perhaps we might wait a moment in dark spaces of our own. Most of us will have times when it felt we could not go on. For whatever reason, what has held us up has gone. One person recalled being asked how she was after her husband had died. 'People would ask me how I was doing, I would often say, *I'm still breathing*. It seemed no small miracle that I could keep doing this when my heart was shattered. It seems a miracle still.' (Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayerbook*, reflection on Easter 2).

I've said this often myself, but mostly as a child during more frivolous times, like when I've come off the bike, or sustained a big hit playing football. 'I'm still breathing.'

The disciples seem like they can barely breathe. It seems they've all but had the life knocked out of them. They didn't understand what the resurrection was about, despite testimony to an open tomb earlier in the day. But how could they know? How can any of us know when we are deep in grief?

I heard these words at a funeral a few months ago. 'Death is ugly and unnatural.' The words shocked me. It isn't how I see the world and it was at the funeral of my own dear mother. Perhaps the preacher wanted to console those who had lost most? Perhaps grief has a way of making us feel that death is ugly and not the true order of things. But no words could take back the reality that death knocks the life out of those who are left to carry on.

Then *Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

I don't know if there are words to convey all the confusion, delight, expectation, wonder and fear of this moment. But there are some things worth highlighting from this strange encounter.

- Locked rooms are no barrier to Jesus.
- Grief and fear are no barrier to Jesus.
- Jesus comes to meet grief and fear while bearing the scars of his crucifixion and death.
- And Jesus breathes on them.

Maybe breath is better than words? Maybe breath conveys something far deeper and more comforting? For those rendered breathless, breath comes as gift and grace. It is Christ's breath that bears the Spirit to enable them to keep on living and breathing, and proclaiming the astonishing news of the risen Christ to the world.

When breath comes to us in such a radical way, it comes as resurrection's gift. When breath comes to us in such a way, it cannot negate the pain and reality of death, but it does change how we perceive death.

Jesus stands among the disciples, showing his broken friends his own wounds, while at the same time breathing the Spirit into their ache.

And they rejoice in the Lord.

And then, a week later, while Thomas gets centre stage, the others are still taking their time to form an idea of what this all means. For the doors are again shut when Jesus breaks his way in.

Those who saw Jesus a week before have indeed witnessed about the encounter. But they haven't told the world. They told Thomas. And the doors remained shut, despite being able to breath a little easier amidst their grief, fear and confusion.

For the record, I don't read Thomas' demand to touch and see at all out of place. The others who had seen Jesus the first time saw that he came to them complete with scars. And the first words Jesus offers the disciples back in John chapter 1 are *come and see*. Thomas is just completing the pilgrimage and cashing in on Jesus' earlier offer. *Come and see!*

Like these who have seen and have passed on their witness, we are invited to our own coming and seeing. It will be different to those first disciples, but we have their stories, their faith, their witness to slowly grow our own understanding of the risen presence of Jesus Christ. And then we have our own encounters – of the gathered body of Christ together as we eat and drink, remember and believe. Of those mysterious moments when breath seems to quicken and Spirit seems to lift and we cannot explain how the light has come to shine in our dark places.

The details of our locked rooms and his breaking in will each differ, but the offer remains to come and see.

This Easter, how will the wounds of the risen Christ meet your wounds?  
How will you allow him to breathe life anew into you?

**Blessing of Breathing** —Jan Richardson

That the first breath  
will come without fear.

That the second breath  
will come without pain.

The third breath:  
that it will come without despair.

And the fourth,  
without anxiety.

That the fifth breath  
will come with no bitterness.

That the sixth breath  
will come for joy.

Breath seven:  
that it will come for love.

May the eighth breath  
come for freedom.

And the ninth,  
for delight.

When the tenth breath comes,  
may it be for us  
to breathe together,  
and the next,  
and the next,

until our breathing  
is as one,  
until our breathing  
is no more.