

- I had pneumonia once about 20 years ago,
 - and I felt ghastly for what seemed like weeks.
- But the thing that I remember most was the night before I was hospitalised.
- I was sitting propped up,
 - just breathing shallow breaths –
 - trying not to cough,
 - trying not to breath too deeply,
 - because both of those things hurt.
- I learned later that that was because one of my lungs had collapsed.

- But at the time, all I knew was that sense of being hemmed in, confined and afraid -
 - confined by pain,
 - afraid of the pain and what it might mean,
 - confined by the seemingly interminable darkness of the night -
 - it always seems worse in the night, that kind of thing.

- Morning came, though, as it does, and I went to my doctor and then immediately on to hospital where they gave me IV pain meds and antibiotics and things started to get better from there.
- I could breathe more deeply and more freely because there was no more pain and no more fear of that pain.

- Now it might seem strange, but I thought of that experience when I was reading the gospel narrative for this morning because those disciples were also feeling confined and afraid.

- They were meeting, in this locked room, in this confined space, because they were afraid of the Temple authorities,
 - afraid that they may yet suffer the same fate as Jesus.
- And, in a sense, everyone in that locked room was also suffering from chronic shortness of breath.

- They'd pretty much had the wind knocked out of them by recent events.
- They are behind locked doors, confined by their fear and anxiety,
 - but also, perhaps, confined and trapped in the darkness of guilt and shame and confusion.
- And then Jesus comes and stands among them and says,
 - "Peace be with you".
- Now, Jesus' words were a common form of greeting in those times,
 - but we might imagine that they might carry a certain extra weight for those disciples.
- Certainly, it must have been a surprise to them to see Jesus, whose death they had just witnessed, standing before them.
- But we might also wonder that perhaps seeing Jesus there, at least in those initial moments, might have done little to allay their fears, but rather added to them.
- Our text says that the doors were locked, "for fear of the Jews" - for fear of the religious authorities.
- But it is also true that the disciples had all abandoned Jesus,
 - becoming complicit with his murderers.
- Perhaps they are afraid that Jesus might condemn them as fickle fair-weather friends,
 - betrayers and deniers.
- Yet Jesus says,
 - "Peace be with you".
- Even with the wounds of his torture and death visible to all, he still says,
 - "Peace be with you".
- And those words are a breath of fresh air to the disciples.
- What they experience in those words of peace is a sense of profound relief,
 - the relief that comes from a burden lifted,

- the relief that comes from being released from the confinement of fear and anxiety, shame and guilt,
- the relief that comes from forgiveness and reconciliation and the restoration of relationship.
- And what those disciples experience in that moment is something that lies at the heart of the resurrection.
- Because the resurrection is not just an event, it is an experience,
 - an experience of forgiveness,
 - an experience of reconciliation and restoration,
 - an experience of hope and newness.
- The disciples do not experience the resurrection just because they see Jesus alive before them,
 - but because they have this experience of forgiveness and freedom and hope.
- And In that experience the disciples begin to breathe again.
- The doors may still be locked but the disciples are no longer confined by their fears and anxieties.
 - They have room to move again.
- But there is more.
- Jesus words of peace are a breath of fresh air to the disciples but they are also the very breath of life itself.
- When Jesus speaks peace to the disciples and then breathes the Holy Spirit on them,
 - those words of forgiveness and peace also have an animating effect.
 - They become words of commissioning as well,
 - words of invitation,
 - words of choosing.

- “Receive the Holy Spirit”, Jesus says,
 - “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”.

- Now, I said that these are words of choosing.
 - And I think they are.
- Jesus is offering his disciples a choice.
- They can go and do likewise.
 - They can go and be like Jesus.
- They can go and continue the work of Jesus by being agents of peace and forgiveness
 - *or*
 - they can not and instead they can continue to *retain* the sins of those around them and refuse to forgive, refuse to speak peace.

- Because what else is retaining sin if it is not allowing that cycle of resentment and retaliation and violence that so often characterises our interactions with each other to continue.

- That is the choice before all disciples of Christ.
- The power to “forgive” and “retain” is not about the church somehow being set up as the moral arbiter of all that is right and wrong.
- It is about choosing to allow ourselves to be agents, vehicles of God's Spirit of peace and forgiveness, or allowing ourselves to succumb to bitterness, resentment and retaliation.
- It's about giving people room to move and breathe again,
 - releasing them from the confines of all their fear and anxiety,
 - welcoming them into a space where they can experience the peace of God,
 - the reviving breath of the Spirit,
 - rather, than confining them with words of judgement and punishment and guilt and shame.

- It is this work of giving people room to move and room to breathe in God's Spirit that we are called to.
- This is our vocation as disciples of Jesus,
 - to participate in that work of peace and forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation so that we and the whole of God's world may come alive again in hope.
- Because that is the power of the resurrection - to bring us alive again in hope.