

The breath of life: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

The psalmist has a body, and it figures prominently in his poetry. His kidneys lash him, his heart rejoices, his pulse (or liver) beats with joy. His body is not gross matter imprisoning him; it pulsates, breathes, dwells securely and participates fully in the overflowing joy and delight he feels in God's right hand forever. Heart-pulse-body-flesh-joy-delight. It's sweat and skin and secretions more than white gloves, church pews and Easter bonnets.

As John Updike wrote, "Make no mistake: if He rose at all / it was as His body / . . . it was as His flesh." As embarrassing as it might be to stand up in front of rational, scientifically minded folk and talk about it, Jesus' resurrected body is at the heart of the Easter proclamation. David and Luke and Peter and John have heard or felt the stirrings of some sort of stunning, irrepressible, unutterable life, and they write that others might taste it. And though the author of 1 Peter writes in terms that might get us thinking of disembodied souls (imperishable, undefiled, unfading), it is the bodily resurrection of Christ that's at the center of his living hope. The life that has him all worked up is not liverless, pulseless, heartless: it bled and breathed. It is perhaps unlike the mostly half life, or life colored by death with which we're familiar. But whatever this life is, it is life in body.

The Gospel of John talks about the life in terms of food and water and being born (again). In one of his last appearances in the book, Jesus breathes on his disciples: hot moist vapor, trace gases, ammonia, acetone, methanol—into their mouths, over their tongues, through the gullet, windpipe, lungs, diaphragm. Later he will eat fish with them. He has been dead for two days. Perhaps you cannot see breath, but you can smell it, and without it you are not alive. Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Take it. Into your nose.

From moment one of creation, God has had an amazingly intimate relationship with our bodies. God puts God's hands in the dirt and forms a human—rolls it, shapes it, wets the clay with spit and sculpts the finer details, the lips and toes. And then God puts God's mouth up against the nostrils of the creature and breathes life into it.

When the disciples say they've seen Jesus, Thomas replies, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." Occasionally the church has been outraged by Thomas's request. What? He wants something he can touch? Shame on you, doubter. But although the church has called Thomas names for his desire, for his need of tangible evidence, Jesus looks for Thomas, finds him and says, "Put your finger here. . . . Put out your hand, and place it in my side. . . . Bring your hand and thrust it into my side."

There's something incredibly vulnerable about this story from both sides: what Thomas needs and what Jesus is willing to give to be known. Jesus gives his breath and gives his body to be felt. This seems like something of a slightly different nature than giving his disciples a logical and coherent belief system to help them order their lives. In Hebrew our soul, our spirit, our *nephesh*, is more like a throat than gnosis. It's the organ of ingestion: what we eat with, drink and breathe with, what's needy in us, what is animal.

Needing is essential to being human. In fact, there is no evidence of any life that doesn't need something—air, water, companions, a parasitical host, something to eat. The resurrection is about life; it reveals life, gives life. What is the life? Emmanuel Levinas says, "Life is love of life, a relationship with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being; thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun." "The human being thrives on his needs." Scripture is fairly insistent that without God we have no life. Our relationship with God is not like some sort of antimatter platonic dream; it has to do with waking up and needing food and breathing. God gives us life in our bodies and our relationship with God from moment one as embodied beings. Given this reality, faith begins to look less like a system or rational assent to a historical fact, a decision or even adherence to an ethical standard, and more like a recognition or awareness or belief or gratitude that our relationship with God is what gives us life.

What if Christ lives in us, not so much like a metaphor, but like breath? What if the love and the grace of God is something that is present to all our senses: our heart, our kidneys, liver, pulse? Maybe it's not as present to our rational minds, and yet it is keeping us alive—as Jean-Luc Marion says, the love of God is a presence so enormous, so permeating, so thorough that it's mistaken for absence. And Easter is less the founding narrative of a religion than the breaking through into our world of "the utterly vivacious," "the ineffably effervescent," "the entirely deathless" life, as

James Alison says, breaking in “that we might believe in the utter vivacity of God, and thus to begin to live, ourselves, outside the dominion of death.” This has all sorts of implications for how we think and act and live, yet is much more vulnerable, more gracious and grateful than what our religions generally deliver.