

May 28, Pentecost (*John 20:19-23*)

Jesus is no ghost; his breath reeks of resurrection.

by [Victoria Lynn Garvey](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

Most folk who trot off to church faithfully on a Sunday don't realize what they're missing when a lector or celebrant proclaims a biblical text. Because frequently there's only so much time anyone, whether clerical or lay, can devote to a Sunday service, it's neither possible nor practical to proclaim an entire book or chapter or even a whole segment of John or Numbers, for instance. Many biblical stories do, however, offer tantalizing clues to those who are curious enough to probe a bit in their leisure time.

Such phrases as "After these things" (Gen. 22:1) or "On the third day" (John 2:1) at the beginning of a reading immediately invite the careful listener to ask "What things, pray tell?" or "What happened on days one and two, I wonder?"

Less blatant, but also suggestive, are the "Now" and "on the evening of the first day" that begin this week's Gospel reading. The Greek *oun* (now) is the writer's nudge inviting us to recall the previous "then." We're near the end of the Fourth Gospel's telling of the Jesus story, and the immediate "then" here is the report of the resurrection with the accompanying appearance to and witness by Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-2, 11-18). And since we're still, according to John's reckoning, on that same day, the great glad news is fresh and ought to serve as an enormous and welcome relief to the rest of Jesus' intimates.

Perhaps the disciples—whoever they are at this point—share the misguided views of their counterparts in Luke's Gospel (24:11) who don't believe the women witnesses. Because instead of celebrating and looking for the newly risen one, they are locked away cringing with a fear that echoes eerily the fearful women non-witnesses in Mark's Gospel (16:8) and the fearful guards and women in Matthew's (28:4-8).

And what does Jesus do when he appears in their midst despite locked doors and blocked ears? He does not do what they might have expected: berate them for having abandoned, denied, and betrayed him. He doesn't even express disappointment of the "I would have expected better of you" sort. Instead, he takes them briefly from the "now" to way back then.

He says, "Shalom," the original kiss of peace that so many of us still enact in various ways during our Sunday worship. As is often the case when trying to tease meaning from foreign words and phrases, there's so much more to this word. To be in shalom with someone is to be at a place of equilibrium and calm; there's no place in shalom for resentment or envy or unpaid debts of any sort. When Jesus greets them with this word of peace, twice to doubly reassure, he's saying: "We're alright, you and I, no matter what you've done or failed to do. That was then; this is very much now." But he does more.

He breathes on them. A singularly curious action, surely. But if these disciples learned their catechism, they would have remembered from their shared tradition the significance of being breathed on. This breath takes them way back to the "then" of creation itself, when God also breathed purposefully. On that occasion, that breath caused the first human to become a living being (Gen. 2:7). Can it be that his breathing on them will also be generative, a source of new life for them, an inspiring for their lives and the ministries to which he's persistently called them?

His breath, in a more recent "then," is what Jesus handed over at his death (John 19:30). Breathing, as our forebears and we know, is one of the defining differences between life and death, between a living being and a corpse. So his breathing on them now also serves as proof that he is no ghost, much as his partaking of the broiled fish in another post-resurrection appearance (Luke 24:43) convinced those Lucan counterparts. Now his breath reeks of resurrection.

Breath as the simple process of inhale-exhale is one thing, if quite valuable. Breathing on *someone* or something takes a bit of effort and intention. This same word, both in its Hebrew and Greek incarnations, is also used to describe the action of blowing to coax life out of smoldering embers, to generate flame and heat and roaring fire from faltering kindling.

The gift of the Holy Spirit should come as no surprise at this juncture. He had been promising that gift back "then" on the night before he died (John 14:15-17) in the long farewell speech. Now having breathed on them, the Spirit is palpably present.