

Living Jesus

Are You Driven by Fear or Drawn by the Energy of the Holy Spirit?

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“The sense of being with Christ risen as [the community] is called into the future relativizes every possibility. The perspective of the cross and resurrection frees the community from excessive fear and opens up the community to new possibilities, which may include difficulties and suffering. The cost of discipleship no longer debilitates.”

—John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*, page 99



am drawn to the scriptural account in the Gospel of John about the disciples gathered behind locked doors after the death of Christ. It has become a guiding faith image for my own life. "

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."

—John 20:19, NRSV

As I work with communities and congregations in discernment, this is an image that often comes to mind for two reasons — the importance of addressing and naming the fears that keep us behind locked doors and the experience of Christ risen in the community that liberates, transforms, and summons.

Part of the work of discernment is growing in awareness of what motivates our actions. Are we driven by our fears or are we drawn by the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit breathed upon us by the presence of the Living Christ? While resurrection is mystery, I have come to believe it is much more than metaphor. John English proclaims that, "Christ is not in our midst, but is our midst. This Christ is a new context for understanding." (John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*, page 82)

There are important indicators of when a community has the sense of "being with Christ risen."

The scriptural image from John gives us a helpful starting place. The resurrected Christ is present not just when things are going well by cultural standards, but also amid our deepest fears, when we are most closed off and uncertain, even grieving our losses. This is a radically hopeful image. Because Christ "is our midst" there is nothing we can do to keep him out of our lives personally and in community. Sometimes it is a dawning awareness, at other times a sudden awakening to the presence of Christ right in the middle of exactly where we are.

Experiencing the Risen Christ in community does not mean that everything is magically new or has changed, but that we begin to see how Christ is present in whatever conditions we find ourselves in. This new way of seeing is the beginning of new action in the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world.

When we move beyond our individualism, open our hearts, reconcile broken relationships, reach out in generosity to one another, we might begin to sense the intimate presence of the risen Christ among us, loving and motivating us. I have felt this in my own congregation during the pandemic.

While things were "fine" prior to the pandemic, a new level of relational care and sharing has been opened in a simplified online format. When we gather, there is a deeper spirit of mutuality, vulnerability, and depth as we have held one another week after week through what is heartbreaking and hard and joyful and good.

We are being transformed from a community of individuals who come together for church into a Christian community enlivened by the spirit of the Risen Christ present among us. Our fears did not disappear, but we kept showing up for each other in the midst of them, and there we found the real and living presence of Christ breathing upon us the possibility of new life. Zoom church is not a glamorous new

life. We are not suddenly more creative or capable or blessed with special insight. It has been a deepening.

In our simplified format and focus on relational and spiritual care, there has been space to receive that breath of spirit upon us. Our attention has shifted from getting done all the activities of church life to being Christian community with and for each other, and with a growing conviction that this calling extends far beyond ourselves to encompass our neighbors and communities. A tenderness and widened compassion have emerged in us. It is not perfect, sometimes clumsy and awkward like we humans tend to be, but it is charged with the presence of Christ, and the possibilities of new life even in death, darkness, and despair.

We are living the very heart of Christian hope and it is simpler and more profound than anything we could have planned when things were normal, busy, successful, fine. I am enlivened to share in a community that is truly transforming into a Christian community — a community that lives together from, in, and through the spirit of Jesus, the peaceful one, who animates our life together.

Communities experiencing the presence of the Risen Christ are enlivened by the energy of the spirit of peace. From the same story in the gospel of John, we read:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

—John 20: 21-22, NRSV

Recall a time when you felt enlivened by this spirit of peace, personally and in community. The breath of Christ upon us is much more than a fleeting experience of "feeling peaceful," though we savor that when it comes. It is a soul-deep orientation of our whole beings toward the peaceful One as the way we see the world and how we respond to what we see.

It instills the courage and conviction to unlock the doors and reenter the world though we know full well that risk and danger may lie ahead if we follow the Christ way.

This was expressed so well by President Stephen Veazey in a sermon from 2005, "As I am becoming increasingly rooted and grounded in Christ, I am finding, at the center of my being, peace — abiding peace — that passes understanding. This peace is not a passive peace. It is a peace that frees me to relate and act in ways that are counter to many of the destructive attitudes and trends so common today. It is an all-encompassing peace that assures me that in life or death I belong to Christ. Therefore, I do not need to be afraid."

What might it look like to cultivate this kind of peace in our communities as the foundation of our identity and mission with Christ in the world? When is the last time you felt the presence of Christ breathing into your community as a breath of fresh vision and possibility?

In this season of journeying toward the cross and embracing the hope of new life, are you driven by fear or drawn by the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit? When do you have the sense of your community being with Christ risen as the source and aim of your life together? Moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One invites us to recognize that even as we pursue him, he is our midst.

Let us breathe and live in the Spirit we seek.



A photograph of two hands clasped together on a wooden surface. The hands are positioned in the center, with fingers interlaced. The wood grain is visible, showing various shades of brown and tan. Overlaid on the image is white text in a clean, sans-serif font. The text is arranged in a vertical stack, reading: "LET US BREATHE AND LIVE IN THE SPIRIT WE SEEK." The opening and closing quotation marks are larger than the other characters. The text is centered horizontally and vertically over the hands.

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