

EASTER II
 April 19, 2009

Grace Church, Amherst
 Sermon
 The Rev. Ann Wood

John 20:19-31

Let us pray: Lord, open our ears that we may hear your word and our hearts that we may receive it. AMEN

---oOo---

‘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.

---oOo---

This morning, I invite you to spend a few minutes reflecting with me about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is probably the least understood person of the Trinity and the most difficult concept to understand. What or who **is** the Holy Spirit? What effects did Jesus’ words, “receive the Holy Spirit” have on his disciples then, and what do these words mean for us now? What blessings become apparent when we receive the power and energy of the Holy Spirit? What might we do with them, and how might they affect us today, here at Grace?

Begin by coming with me to that upper room – the room where Jesus and his disciples had recently eaten their last meal together – a room filled **then** with human dreams of glory and Christ’s love and concern for the well being of His followers. In Biblical times, the homes of people with some means had two rooms, one like a small box on top of a larger one. The upper room was most likely reached by an outside staircase and often would have been used by a Rabbi to meet and talk with his disciples. Jesus had arranged for such a room for their Passover feast. – But, that was last week.

This week the scene's quite different. Jesus' crucifixion has occurred and most Pharisees, Saducees and members of the Sanhedrin are feeling a great deal of dismissive contempt towards any followers of that man, Jesus. The disciples, who've lost their dreams of glory and power, are meeting late in the day. The door's locked and they sit in dread that **they** might be the next to be arrested. They're listening fearfully for any step on the stairs, for any knock on the door – then, suddenly, Jesus is there – standing in the midst of them. Imagine the expressions of shock and disbelief on the faces of the disciples. In Luke's Gospel, we're told “They were startled and frightened thinking they saw a ghost. Jesus then asks ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” One can imagine the relief, joy and amazement that followed. This man they'd given up for dead, is here – standing in their midst. Jesus reassures them by speaking the traditional Jewish greeting, “Peace be with you”. He shows them the marks of the nails in his hands and his side – the proof they need, to know that this really is Jesus, their Lord. Having assured them of the power and the promise found in the resurrection, Jesus again says “Peace be with you”. He follows His blessing with their marching orders – their commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Loving God that He is, Jesus empowers his followers with the Gifts they need to undertake the Gospel Commission: “he breathed on them and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” – the Advocate he'd promised them during their last meal together.

By breathing on his disciples, Jesus is not only awakening them to life and power, he's reminding them of the story of Creation. In the Book of Genesis, we're told “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the

breath of life; and the man became a living being”. Millennia later, through this action with the disciples, God became part of humanity, via the Holy Spirit, in a way and with a power not known since Adam and Eve’s downfall in the Garden of Eden. These rough hewn fisherfolk and tax collectors will begin a community known for its love, compassion and care.

What do we understand by the Holy Spirit then – or as he’s sometimes called, the Advocate, the Comforter, Paraclete or the Spirit of Truth? The Catechism or Outline of the Faith in our Book of Common Prayer, states that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity – which we believe is one God, consisting of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God at work in the world and in the church even now. He’s revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures as the “giver of life” – remember the words of the Nicene Creed? The Spirit’s also described as the One who spoke through the prophets, as well as the power fueling and guiding the leaders of the people – God at work in the world. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear that “Joshua, son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him”. In Numbers, Moses moans “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus himself describes the Spirit as rivers of living water, which shall flow out of a believer’s heart. Our Catechism tells us that in the New Testament, “the Holy Spirit is revealed as the Lord who leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ”. Paul, of course, is a New Testament example of someone who was empowered by the Holy Spirit. After his conversion, he went on to lead others to Christ and he himself pressed on towards his goal of “growing in the

likeness of Christ". Some lesser known examples of Spirit-filled people are Apollos, Aquila and Priscila, who all worked with Paul to spread the Gospel. Other examples who come to mind are the four unmarried and un-named daughters of Philip, who are mentioned only briefly, but who, we are told, had the gift of prophecy, (one of the promised gifts of the Spirit).

The purpose for which all disciples of Christ received the power and energy of the Holy Spirit, was that they might bear witness to Christ. We, too, when we receive that gift are expected to use it for the same purpose. I'm reminded of an occasion at the hospital, when I was hurrying down the hallway on my way back to the office, my visits for the day completed. It was time to go home. On passing by a particular patient's room, I experienced a strong feeling that I needed to go in. A young woman, the patient's daughter, was sitting by the bedside. Her Mother was in tears. She had just received a cancer diagnosis. The cancer was widespread and there was nothing that could be done to help her, other than to control her pain. After visiting for a little while, I asked if she would like prayer. She agreed. After the prayer was over, she sat up in bed, her tears gone, a beautiful smile on her face. "I never knew we could pray like that" she said. "That was beautiful". She had, until then, only heard formal prayers read from a prayer book. I made several more visits to that patient during later admissions and got to know her daughters also. When she died, they asked me to speak at her funeral, even though our faith traditions were different. Had I not paid attention to that initial nudge from the Spirit, I would have missed out on an opportunity to share the good news of the Gospel with her, which, in turn enabled her to develop a deeper relationship with our Lord.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is a gift, which we generally receive initially at our baptism. I say generally, because, when Peter was called from Joppa by Cornelius to go talk to the Gentiles in Caesarea, it so happened that when he was still speaking to them the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard him speak. In this case God used the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to prove to still racist Peter that Gentiles were fit to be baptized. It wasn't until afterwards that everyone was baptized.

Last week, during the baptismal service, we heard Rob say: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever". When our confirmands are confirmed by the Bishop in June, they will hear the following words: "Renew in these your servants the covenant you made with them at their baptism. Send them forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before them". Priests and Deacons receive the replenishment of the gift once more at their ordination, with the Bishop's laying on of hands. You may wonder why we need to receive the Holy Spirit more than once, and the answer is that the power can run dry if it's not replenished. It's not that the Holy Spirit ever leaves us. The Spirit's often likened to the wind – sometimes it blows strongly and at other times, it's barely a breeze. We can become like the wind when it's died down completely, if we don't replenish our supplies. You may remember the story of the ten virgins at the wedding ceremony. Five of the virgins were prepared with extra oil for any delay in the bridegroom's arrival, while the other five had to go off to purchase replenishments. In the meantime, the bridegroom arrived; the virgins with their lamps ready went into the banquet with him, while the unprepared were left out. Are we prepared for when the Holy Spirit calls us, I wonder?

You may also recall how many times Jesus goes off to a lonely place to pray, especially following a particularly busy time when he's been healing the crowds. Whenever he had something difficult or important to do, Jesus took himself off to be with God, to pray and replenish his reserves. If Jesus had to do this, how much more do we need to do likewise and how dependent on Jesus must we be? We come to his Table "not for solace only" but also to be refilled, so that we may go out to do the work God has given us to do.

Since the Holy Spirit's a gift, then we know God will include benefits and blessings with this gift. I've already mentioned the spirit of wisdom and the gift of prophecy. Individually, we can expect to receive the fruit of the Spirit that Paul speaks of to the Galatians – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. On our own, without the help of the Holy Spirit, we struggle with what Paul calls the "desires of the flesh", in which he includes idolatry, jealousy, anger, envy and enmities.

Moving on from individual benefits, Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians, says: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues" - or languages. These gifts are given for specific purposes to help the church grow. "Are all apostles", Paul continues, "Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" And the answer, of course, is 'no'. But since we don't EACH possess all of the gifts, it just emphasizes how much we need one another.

When we bring this idea of needing each other closer to home, I think of the building up of our community here at Grace. We're able to recognize our own gifts, as well as those of others in the congregation. We're not all administrators, or financial wizards; we're not all good at dealing with family crises or visiting the sick; we're not all good at teaching or at seeing the forest for the trees. The list can go on; the point being that we need each person's gifts to contribute to the health and well-being of the body of Christ – here in Amherst. Jesus is dependent on us, his Church.

The Holy Spirit prompts us, then, guides, empowers, heals, teaches and provides a personal prayer language, to name but a few of the blessings. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit is given to us at our baptism, and replenished on other occasions, but its power needs to be released to enable us to do God's work. Very often, we're not aware of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. The release of the power that comes with that awareness is different for each one of us. For some, it comes like a bolt of lightning, perhaps during a special service, for others, it may come when reading a book or the Bible, for others, through prayer or when questioning one's faith. It deepens our relationship with our Lord and we become aware that somehow we've been changed. In order to refresh this power, we need to come to the Table regularly, pray, meditate, spend time with God away from the clamor and busyness of the world – just as Jesus did. The disciples, who, except for Paul and Matthew, hadn't received a formal education, were neither wealthy, nor powerful in worldly terms, but were taught by the Holy Spirit and were empowered to do the kinds of things Jesus had been doing while on earth.

That power didn't stop with the disciples two thousand years ago. The Spirit falls on us today. The Spirit goes on teaching and enables us to learn and grow. He doesn't

always lead us in expected ways. On the contrary, he often leads us where we don't particularly foresee or perhaps even want to go. The Spirit filled journey is an adventure. In a little while, when we come to say the words of the Post Communion prayer – "And now Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do" – may we look at those words with adventurous eyes and ask the Holy Spirit to show us any fresh meaning or needed action in our lives. May we hear anew Jesus' message said to each one of us "As the Father has sent me, so I send you".

AMEN