**The New Normal**

**A Reflection on John 20:19-31 for Easter 2B**

*by Gillian Collins*

Throughout the past year of lockdowns and limitations, for me there has been one dependable highlight of the week – Sunday morning worship, offering a chance to reconnect with the normal in bewildering times. I'm sure we're all immensely grateful to all those who have made this possible in new and challenging ways. So is this the "new normal", as some are saying, in which we continue to offer a mixture of possibilities for in-person and online worship? Or will we gradually ease back into doing things as before? What lessons will be learned? How will we all be changed by living through the Covid times?

The same could be asked of the disciples of Jesus, as they emerged from the tumultuous ups and downs of being with Jesus through his final weeks of ministry, sharing in the thrill of Palm Sunday and knowing the despair of his trial and crucifixion. In today's Gospel reading, we meet them as they confront life without the bodily presence of their Lord and Master. How were they to adapt to this new reality?

Mary Magdalene had been to the tomb and found it empty. She had run and told the disciples, and Peter and John had gone back with her to see for themselves. Do you imagine yourself being there – what would you have done? Sent for the others to come and join you in a praise meeting? But no, they just went back home. Incredible! Only Mary stayed at the tomb, weeping for her lost Lord, and that’s when she met the Risen Christ. We remember how he called her by name, reassuring her that he was indeed the same Lord – but now their relationship would need to change. "Don't cling to me," he said. I take this to mean that she needed to let go of the past and move on into a new reality, so I find it puzzling that we hear so little of what this meant for her future. She was the first eye witness to the Resurrection, Apostle to the Apostles, and yet she is airbrushed from the history of the early Church. (Some scholars believe she had a significant leadership role and there are fragments of writings which may support this. gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm)

So Mary Magdalene told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and passed on his message. And what did they do? They stayed behind locked doors. We are told they're in hiding “for fear of the Jews” but there's no suggestion that the religious authorities were planning to hunt them down, so there really was nothing for them to be afraid of – except, perhaps, the new normal and what it might mean for them. What if Mary was right? What if Jesus **had** been raised from the dead? What would he have to say to them? They had all let him down and abandoned him at the worst of times, deserting him at his arrest in Gethsemane, even denying knowing him at all (Peter). Judas Iscariot had killed himself out of remorse for his part in the affair. How must the rest of them have been feeling? They were surely desperately ashamed of themselves. Would Jesus be angry with them? Perhaps he would be out for revenge! So rather than going out searching for Jesus, it would be far safer to lock the doors and hope the whole problem would go away!

Perhaps we are more like the disciples than we would admit. How often have you or I locked the door to keep Jesus out, maybe on account of something we're ashamed of in the past, some fear for the future, or something we just don't want to confront? Sometimes, we're afraid of opening our hearts honestly to Jesus, so we lock ourselves in, for fear of what might follow. Maybe the disciples weren’t keeping "the Jews" out, they were keeping themselves in!

What does Jesus do? He "came and stood among them…” He breaks into their fear and shame. Taking the initiative, he enters the room and says to them, “Peace be with you”. He says to the disciples, as he says to us, “It’s ok…” He’s not out to settle old scores. He’s not angry with us. He knows our failures, he knows our weaknesses, he knows everything we have done wrong. And he says, “It’s ok…let’s move on…” Did you notice, he doesn’t even say to the disciples, “I forgive you”? There is absolutely no mention of the past. It’s done, it’s finished, it’s not an issue any more. Their new normal begins as he breathes on them, saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

Jesus invites them – and us – to start afresh and go with him right back to the beginning of the whole story, to where it all started in the Garden of Eden. It was there that humans first hid from God. That evening, as they heard the Lord God walking in the garden, "they hid from him among the trees”(Gen 3:8). Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden; the disciples were hiding from God behind closed doors. Then the Lord God breathed on Adam and he began to live. Now Jesus breathes on his disciples so that in the power of the Holy Spirit they may be re-born.

Breath has taken on a special heightened significance for us during Covid times. We have come to mistrust the very act of breathing, which we know can transmit infection and danger. But more than anything, we look forward to a time when it's safe again to come close and mingle breath with those dearest to us – this may be the "new normal" we most long for. But more than anything else in the world, Jesus longs to stand before us and say, “Peace be with you”, breathing into us the new life of God's renewal.

**Prayer**

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love the way you love,
and do what you would do. (Edwin Hatch, StF 370)