

## Gospel reflections

### [John 20:19-23](#)

When you think of Pentecost, what Bible story springs to mind? If you are like me, your mind probably goes to the Acts passage where the Holy Spirit sparks tongues of fire upon the disciples and swirls through the crowd. This year, John's gospel provides a different lens for reflecting on Pentecost with a story that occurs much earlier, than the events recounted in Acts and is a more gentle and personal introduction to the Spirit.

John's account of the giving of the Holy Spirit occurs during Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance to his followers. It brings a climatic end to the fourth gospel that began with John the Baptist introducing Jesus as God's chosen one, "the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit." (John 1:33). In these passages rather than rushing winds and crowds proclaiming the arrival of the Spirit, we have Jesus breathing on his frightened followers. In the midst of such fear and uncertainty, Jesus brings peace, words of comfort and reassurance of his ongoing presence in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus returns to prepare and send his followers to continue the work he had begun. Just as the breath of God brought life to the first person in Genesis, Jesus breathes life into his frightened followers, transforming and empowering them with the Spirit so that they may be his ongoing presence in the world.



Through Jesus and his Spirit that dwells within us we are the perpetual presence of God in the world and the people through whom God shows his love for the world. Luther called us 'little Christs' ...before you dry wretch at living out such an impossible task, Luther fully recognised that we are incapable of ever living up to what God desires of us. It is only the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for the disciples, and for all of us, to be who Jesus wants us to be as he lives in and through us. Just as Jesus breathed the Spirit upon the disciples, we receive nothing less than the fullness of Jesus' Spirit. We take our place alongside all those who have gone before us, empowered by the Spirit to communicate in word and action God's love and healing for all.

As the Easter season draws to a close, Pentecost continues the celebration that Jesus lives, that he is not apart from us, but dwells within and lives through us. We are empowered to be the presence of God on earth through the indwelling of God's Spirit. Through the Spirit, the presence of Jesus continues in the world, through you and me. For weary leaders in Lutheran education who have endured weeks of fear and uncertainty, this is your peace and life-giving power source.

'Rest in the knowledge that God's Spirit weaves your participation as a single thread within a life renewing pattern. You are connected to the source of LIFE!' *Richard Rohr*

### Prayer

*"Then he breathed upon them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" John 20:22*

Spirit of God,  
may we breathe in and hold your love within us  
May we breathe out and share it with the world

Spirit of God,  
may we breathe in and hold your peace within us  
May we breathe out and share it with the world

Spirit of God,  
may we breathe in and hold your life within us  
May we breathe out and share it with the world.

~ Christine Sine, on the **Godspace** website. <http://godspace.wordpress.com>

[The Blessing](#) as recorded by UK churches as a prayer over and for their communities.

[Breathe](#) Nooma Rob Bell

Extra thoughts on Verse 23 taken from [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=887](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=887)

*The things mentioned in verse 23 ("If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained") sound at first hearing like responsibilities that few of us would choose for ourselves. Maybe fewer of us would trust an institutionalized church to wield them. What is Jesus talking about?*

*It is imperative that we make sense of this verse in light of all that has come before it. Too many mistakes have been made in the past by those who have read John 20:23 in isolation or with a sloppy connection to the unrelated words of Matthew 16:19. We must attend to how the Johannine Jesus has already characterized the problem of "sin," the role of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of his ministry. If not, we risk perpetuating a legacy of misuse and polemic that has muddied this verse across the history of its interpretation.*

*Jesus is not appointing the church as his moral watchdog; nor does he commission it to arbitrate people's assets and liabilities on a heavenly balance sheet.*

*In John's Gospel, Jesus talks about sin as unbelief, the unwillingness or incapacity to grasp the truth of God manifested in him. To have sin abide, therefore, is to remain estranged from God. The consequence of such a condition is ongoing resistance. Sin in John is not about moral failings; primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God's revelation when confronted by it, in Jesus.*

*(Note what Jesus, says, concerning the world, in John 15:22: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin." Cf. John 9:39-41).*

*Consequently, the resurrected Christ tells his followers (all his followers) that, through the Spirit that enables them to bear witness, they can set people free ("set free" or "release" is a better translation than "forgive" in 20:23) from that state of affairs. They can be a part of seeing others come to believe in Jesus and what he discloses.*

*Failure to bear witness, Jesus warns, will result in the opposite: a world full of people left unable to grasp the knowledge of God. That is what it means to "retain" sins ("retain" is the opposite of "set free"). Jesus is not--at least, not in this verse--granting the church a unique spiritual authority. He is simply reporting that a church that does not bear witness to Christ is a church that leaves itself unable to play a role in delivering people from all that keeps them from experiencing the fullness that Jesus offers.*