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THE BREATH AND SPIRIT OF GOD

John 20:19-31; Genesis 2:7; Easter 2A; April 11-12, 2026

The words for “spirit,” “breath” and “breathe” are basically the same in some languages. This is the case for the biblical languages Hebrew and Greek, as well as the English words that come down to us from Latin. Our word “respiration” means to “breathe again.” “Inspire” means to “breathe in,” and “expire” to “breathe out.” These words are often used to describe living and dying.

One way to check if someone is alive is whether the person is still breathing. If you have ever been by the bedside of loved ones in the process of dying, their breathing may get labored before it stops, sometimes with one last exhaled breath. From this last exhaled breath, we get the euphemism for dead, “expired.”

Jesus’ last word from the cross shortly before He died was, **“Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit”** (Lk 23:46; Ps 31:5). This is the same word for spirit used for Holy Spirit. The Evangelists may have had a double meaning in mind when they related Jesus’ death. All four Gospels describe the death of Jesus in terms of His spirit or breath. Matthew and John say Jesus **“gave up the spirit”** (Jn 19:30; Mt 27:50). Both Mark and Luke use the word **“expired”** (ἐξέπνευσεν; Mk 15:37; Lk 23:46). When Jesus breathed out His last breath, He gave up the Holy Spirit that was dwelling in His human flesh.

First Aid training teaches that when we find someone unconscious the first thing we check for is respiration and a pulse, breathing and a heartbeat. If the person has stopped breathing, after checking the airway, we start artificial respiration with a few quick puffs of air to fill the person’s lungs and then proceed to chest compressions if the heart has stopped – though these days probably attach an AED, an automated external defibrillator. The point is that, if a person is not breathing, he or she is dying; we want to get the heart and lungs working again, to resuscitate and save a life.

Jesus “expired” on the cross, died, and was buried. Jesus did not breathe the three days He was in the tomb. When He received back the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday, Jesus started breathing again, respiration restarted, and His heart started beating again.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The living, breathing Jesus appeared to His disciples that first Easter evening. Those who are breathing can speak. If you have ever had your breath knocked out of you, until you get your breath back you can't speak. What did Jesus say to His disciples after getting His breath back? **“Peace be with you.”** Then He went on to say and do something amazing. **And when He had said this, [Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.”**

What does it mean that Jesus **“breathed on them”**? Jesus was spiritually “resuscitating” His disciples with the Holy Spirit. Their faith in Him had died and they needed to be brought back to life. They had stopped breathing the Holy Spirit in and out. (Remember, that “spirit” is the word for “breath”). The disciples’ faith in Jesus had “expired;” their hearts had stopped beating and their faith had died. The disciples needed to start breathing again, respiration, and the Holy Spirit needed to fill them again with faith through the gospel word of Jesus: the forgiveness of sins. Without the breath and Spirit of Jesus, the disciples had expired in unbelief, dead in their sins. They needed to be resuscitated by Jesus and resume respiration.

The same is true for us. We were dead in our trespasses and sins and destined for hell until God made us alive together with Christ and saved us by grace, as St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2. Jesus expired and died on the cross with our sins so we, who in unbelief were not breathing the Holy Spirit, who expired and died in our sins, could be resuscitated to life and forgiven for Jesus’ sake. This is what happens in Holy Baptism when we are given the Holy Spirit.

One of the themes of Easter is God reviving and renewing this old creation that fell into sin. God made us to live forever with Him, not to sin and die. When Jesus **“breathed on His disciples and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’”** He was addressing what had happened at the original creation, fixing what was broken and reviving what had died.

The word John used here, “**breathed,**” (ἐνεφύσησεν) is the same one in Genesis describing the creation of Adam. “**The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature**” (Gen. 2:7 LXX).

To live, Adam needed to inhale and exhale air. He began doing that when God breathed into the nostrils of his physical body. By this, God made humanity to be more than just physical living creatures like the plants and animals; God also gave us a soul and spirit. God breathes into human beings a soul and a spirit to believe in Him. When Adam’s physically body came to life, he also came alive spiritually; Adam received the Holy Spirit to believe in and serve God.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they “expired,” they breathed out the Holy Spirit, and they later “expired” physically and died because they had sinned. When Jesus took all the sin of man into Himself on the cross, He “expired,” died and gave up His Spirit. By doing this, our sins died with Him and we were forgiven. And then Jesus rose from the dead, His Spirit restored. He was resuscitated to raise us to life with Him. For us to live we need to be filled with God’s breath and Spirit of life in Christ, which we lost through sin and unbelief. How can a dead person breathe again and live?

Three times in our Gospel today we heard Jesus say to His disciples, “**Peace be with you.**” ...**And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.”** God’s peace in Christ brings with it the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus showed Himself alive to His disciples after His crucifixion and gave them His peace. This was Him forgiving their sins and restoring their faith in Him as their Savior. How could they be sure this really was for them? **Jesus showed them His hands and His side** with the marks of the nails and spear. The One who died for them also rose from the dead for them.

Have you ever noticed that, when the Lord’s Supper celebrated, the distribution is initiated by the pastor quoting Jesus in John 20 in the *Pax Domini*, “The peace of the Lord be with you always”? The risen Lord Jesus breaks into our “upper room” today where we have gathered in fear and shows Himself alive to us in His body and blood in the Sacrament.

Then we sing to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, concluding with, “grant us peace.” We come to the Communion rail and eat His true body and drink His true blood for the forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation. Then your pastor sends you back to your pew and later to your homes with the blessing, “Depart ✠ in peace.” The last words of the Divine Service emphasize this: “The Lord look upon you with favor and ✠ give you peace.”

The response of Christians to God’s blessing of “peace” is āmen or āmen (either pronunciation is acceptable). The point of your “amen” at each of these spots in the Service is to acknowledge that you have received God’s peace, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ, but many members choose not to say or sing them.

When the pastor holds up the host bread and chalice of wine and announces, “The peace of the Lord be with you always,” to say “āmen” or sing “āmen” is to confess your faith that Jesus, risen from the dead, is showing you His wounds from the cross and about to give you His true body and blood.

When the pastor dismisses you with, “Depart ✠ in peace,” which is basically, “Your sins are forgiven,” to say “amen” is to receive that gift with thanksgiving, confessing, “Yes, it is for me.”

When receiving the blessing of the Lord at the end of the Service, your “amen” means going out with the joy of having God’s peace as you reenter a world lacking in peace, a world that needs you to bring God’s peace to it. Why do so few people enthusiastically and joyfully speak or sing their “amens” at these points? I don’t know.

To speak anything requires breath in our lungs. After expiring, the dead no longer can speak. God has made us alive, resuscitating us. God has inspired us, putting His Holy Spirit in us. Breathing again, respiration, God has given us the ability to speak. Those who have been raised from the death of sin and unbelief use their breath to confess their faith in the risen Jesus Christ. Amen.

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