

**Easter Day**  
**12/4/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Colossians 3:1-4**  
**Psalm 104**  
**John 20:1-22**

**Breathe**

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*In a sentence*

*The risen Jesus lives by the same breath of God as sustained him all the way to the cross, and this life is to be ours also.*

Under the shadow of COVID 19, one of the questions which has popped up about the place in the church is ‘how can we celebrate Easter?’ It’s not the only question; how can we ‘be church’, more generally, continues to exercise us, as does the specific question of Holy Communion.

Likely these are all aspects of the same central problem. In the months and years to come, we will have much to ponder as we move out of the shadow of the virus. We are seeing something about ourselves – something about death in particular – and this will force us deeper into the gospel. For the gospel is good news precisely in response to our experience of death.

While there is a cluster of questions which confront us at the moment, we’ll focus today on that of Easter, for here we are.

Central to any response to ‘How can we celebrate Easter?’ is the question, ‘What *time* is it?’ It might seem, of course, that we’ve already answered that. Our calendar tells us that it is ‘Easter time’. And so here we come to the first of several time-tellings which matter here – that of the calendar.

The calendar tells us that this is what we should be doing now – reading these texts, singing these hymns, lifting up our Spirits and, most likely, eating egg-shaped chocolate. Calendars allow us to balance that we cannot do everything at once, but everything must be done. And so we allocate a time for every purpose under heaven. Now is ‘Easter time.’

The second time-telling in answer ‘What time is it?’ is our immediate sense of what is happening here and now. We are, we believe, in unprecedented – *un-calendared* – times: this is a ‘special’ time, a time *sui generis*, a time of its own ‘species’ *in conflict* with calendared time. By this we mean that we have not experienced anything like this before.

And yet, this assertion has its force not so much in the ‘like this’ as in the ‘we’. ‘We’ have not experienced this, we for whom death is not usually on the door step, likely to kick the door in, forcing us from our livelihood, isolating us from those we love, driving us into far countries where we have no rights and life is only struggle. But if ‘we’ do not usually know this, it has always been so that many do.

What is unprecedented is not so much any particular aspect of which is happening now, or even all of them together, but that we are *all* experiencing it at once. Death is making itself felt in places from which it is usually very distant. Suddenly we find that it is in the very air we breathe. And so, for fear of breathing, we isolate ourselves, and jobs are

lost, and debts accumulate, and economies go into recession and – one good thing at least – a few lies we have believed about ourselves are being exposed.

For we are relearning a truth happily forgotten because it is too difficult to entertain for long: the bells tolls for *thee* (Donne). We will likely forget this again, of course; there will rise up a generation which knows not COVID 19. But this is a truth with which the Easter gospel has always been entangled: there is *always* death in the ‘air’.

Let’s then turn to that Easter gospel itself for a further clue about our time.

The thought of resurrection, in the time of Jesus, was itself a very time-ridden notion. As an idea, resurrection was caught up in a wider cosmology which expected the end of the world to be a final judgement through which God would set everything right. The concreteness of Jewish thought *required* that there be a general resurrection of the dead. There are no ‘spirits’ to be judged – we are human in our spirited-bodies. This expectation was strong enough to imply that, if a person was said to be raised in the way that Jesus was, this was a sign that the *end times* judgement had begun.

The report of a risen Jesus, then, poses not (merely) the problem of how a dead person could stop being dead, but *at least* as strongly, the consequence that the world is coming to its end: time is filled up. This is why apocalyptic end-time thought is so prevalent in the New Testament. If Jesus is risen, the end is upon us, and with it God’s justifying judgement of our time.

A challenge the church has faced ever since the gospel crossed the ‘borders’ of Palestine into a world not steeped in time-ly associations with resurrection-talk is that to speak of resurrection *now* ‘presses the wrong buttons’. Not least what happens is the proposal that Jesus is risen prompts first the question of the *possibility* of a resurrection at all, marginalising any significance of resurrection for understanding who Jesus is or what he has to do with our time.

But, for the New Testament, ‘risen’ is central to making sense of Jesus and so to making sense of ourselves and God. In particular, ‘Jesus is risen’ does not stand on its own but points back to ‘Jesus was crucified’. These two – the cross and the resurrection – are inextricably linked, such that the one is nothing important without the other.

Resurrection time speaks to the time which Jesus himself lived, and which culminated in the cross. His life was also one lived with death in the air, although less specific than what we fear inhaling in our current ‘special’ time.

And yet his breathing was also an exhaling of what God had breathed into him. Jesus’ triumph is not in the resurrection; this is something done ‘to’ him, not by him. His triumph was that death was overcome in his *life* – a life sustained by breathing out what God breathed in, even when the air – shared with us – carried now the contagion of sin. His triumph was thriving in an atmosphere which makes us sick, and thriving all the way to his final act, as the Gospel writers all put it: to ‘give up the ghost’ (KJV), to ‘breathe his last’ (NRSV) on the cross (Matthew 27.50; Mark 15.37; Luke 23.46; John 19.30).

Jesus’ resurrection, we might then imagine, is another great inhaling of the breath God received from him, and held, but for a moment.

How do we celebrate Easter? By *breathing*, even when there is death in the air. This is not because we *have* to breathe – we’re not talking now about physiology. The breathing we mean here is that which exhales what God breaths into us. This was the life of Jesus up to, and after, the cross – given now to be ours.

Our time is measured not by the calendar and not by the sudden appearance of something we imagine time has not seen before. Our time is measured by the

inhale,

exhale,

inhale,

exhale of the Spirit of God,

breathed into us by God, breathed out by us back to God, to be breathed again.

Easter does not wait for the arrival of the calendared moment or the passing of the ‘unprecedented’ moment. This is because to wait would be to *hold* our breath – to *pretend to be dead*.

Indeed, when the virus’ crisis moment passes it will be something like the relief which comes after we have held our breath, physiologically speaking. But the baptised are risen from death’s waters and need hold their breath no longer, even if the air still carries the stench of death.

For our breath is the breath of Jesus himself, even the Holy Spirit.

Lift up your hearts, then.

And breathe.

For it is in the inhale and exhale of the breath of God that we find the time of our lives.

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