**The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH, UCC**

**Rev Bob Macfarlane, Interim Minister**

**Sunday after Easter, April 27, 2014**

**“Jesus Breathed on Them”**

**John 20: 19 - 31**

All the jelly beans and colored eggs have been discovered – and eaten! The trumpets have been tucked away in their cases. And the pomp and circumstance of Easter Morning has been replaced by School Vacations, by hugging good-bye to visiting relatives, and by taking a breather from cooking and emptying dishwashers.

But it was not so for the disciples, who scripture tells us were huddled in a locked room, hiding from the Roman authorities, unable to venture out into the Jerusalem streets for fear of detection and arrest. Like the old game of “sardines,” - perhaps you yourself played this childhood game - these followers of the Messiah, these believers in a new way of living, now find themselves clustered and cloistered, fearful and isolated.

Scripture reminds us of the emotions which went from the highs of parading through the Jerusalem gate, as crowds waved palms and put down their garments on the road as Jesus rode by, to the very lows of Good Friday and the Cross, and then up again as they discovered the empty tomb on Easter. And now these disciples were scared and fearful, locked away, and wondering if they themselves might be next on the Cross.

No one knew. No one could say. No one had any answers. No one saw any future. Perhaps it was indeed time to pack it all in, and head back to Galilee and re-claim those favorite fishing spots. Perhaps these past three years really were for naught, a waste of precious time, a road diverging where the wrong path was chosen.

But of all things, we are reminded that God is the God of SURPRISES, and that the Cross does not have the last word. We read in John’s Gospel that as these sardined disciples were huddled together, behind locked doors, an amazing thing happened. We read, “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met, were locked…..Jesus came and stood among them. And he said, “Peace be with you.”

When fear has gripped us the most, when we are cornered by the world’s most uncaring consequences, when we are stripped of everything we hold dear, when life seems to be hitting rock bottom, when we’ve lost a job or a family member, when someone is in the throes of a divorce, when we grieve for a child lost at sea on a ferry, or shot in a schoolroom, what can we expect?

We can expect the UN-EXPECTED!! For it happened that, in that hideaway, in that sealed, safe-house room, Jesus appeared to them. The disciples experienced their Teacher and their Master and their Savior, APPEARING to them, COMING to them, STANDING AMONG THEM, and SAYING to them, the very words they needed to hear. Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you.”

He didn’t necessarily say that the situation would change, that the authorities would be calling off the manhunt, or that life would now become a bed of roses. NO! But he DID say, that the peace of God would be upon them, and that no matter the circumstances they may encounter, all would be well, because they could live in confidence, that Jesus would always come to them in their need, as he had come to them through locked doors. And Jesus would always offer “the peace of God which passes all human understanding.”

Now there was one WRINKLE in this scenario. Those disciples to whom Jesus had just appeared, were calmed, and were given God’s peace. But one disciple had not been there. Actually two, because of course Judas was now longer in the picture, so we surmise that ten disciples were ensconced in the room. Scripture does not say = we have no way of knowing - but perhaps Thomas had been sent out to find some food or water for the group. Perhaps he was a courier passing messages to friends on the outside. Perhaps in the confusion of those scary moments, he had gotten separated from the other disciples, and was in hiding somewhere else.

We just don’t know. But we DO know, that unfortunately, Thomas was not among them when Jesus appeared. He was not able to put his eyes upon him, to hug him, or to receive God’s peace in person. You see, Thomas is US! He is you and me, we who were not present in those early days, we who were not able to witness Jesus’ resurrected personality in person.

Thomas finally finds the disciples’ hideout, and works his way into the house. And he is shocked by what he hears – that Jesus had appeared to them, and had given his peace and his reassurance.

“We have seen the Lord!” said his fellow disciples. But Thomas doubted. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Now this is NOT a reflection upon Thomas’ faith. He was as faithful a disciple as any. But he had NOT BEEN THERE. And it was natural that he would be skeptical of this news. You and I would be the same way. We’d ask the same questions. And we too would want proof. So it was a very reasonable remark of Thomas to say he would have a very hard time believing, unless he could see for himself.

And a week later, Thomas got his chance. For once again, Jesus appeared to them in that same locked hideaway, and there, Jesus allowed Thomas to see his wounds, and to witness first hand, that he stood among them. And once again, Jesus breathed on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.” And Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus answered Thomas, and answered each of us down through the ages, with these famous words: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.” So we sing,

“Breath on me, Breathe of God, fill me with life anew,

That I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.”

**Let us pray:**

“May we be ever grateful, O God, for one who doubted, and who on our behalf, believed. We pray that you might breath upon us, give to us the gift of your Holy Spirit, and leave with us the peace of God which passes all human understanding.

Amen.