In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We read in Genesis 2,

The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

(Genesis 2:7 RSV)

God created humankind by taking dust, forming it into a human, and then breathing life into it. In the way Genesis tells it, all of the other creatures were simply created. But with humanity God takes special care. He takes dust, forms it, and then breathes life. Humankind is set apart from the rest of God’s good creation. But for us this morning, what is especially important, is the breath of life.

Though humankind was made from the same sort of stuff as the rest of creation, the same dust, the source of humanity’s life was different. The life that came with this breath was not itself eternal life, but it was to lead to eternal life. This breath was not God’s own life, but it shows that amongst all of God’s creatures, only humankind was made for sharing God’s life. With this breath in our lungs, we were to grow and mature into creatures ever more full of life, ever more alive. This breath was to sustain us until that day when we ate of the right tree, not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the tree of life.

But when Adam and Eve sinned, this life was lost, this fellowship and communion was destroyed. “On the day that you eat of the tree,” the Lord said, “on that day, you shall die.” Well, they did not physically die that day. What died was their fellowship and communion with God. They ate of the tree, and the life that was to grow and mature into greater fellowship and intimacy with God, this life died. Sin plunged humanity into chaos and disorder, and kept this breath of life from growing into eternal life.

This chaos and disorder, this death that our first parents fell into was passed on to all who would come after, to you, and to me. And so, we needed something to break into our situation. We needed someone from outside of our problem to set us right. We needed to be rescued. We who were dead needed someone who was alive.
So in the fullness of time, the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. The Word entered into our disorder and chaos to set it at peace once again, to make things right. The same Word who gave life to humankind in the beginning, now received life from humankind. The same one who breathed life into humankind, now came to breathe with us, came to breathe the same air that we do.

But the Word did not merely become one of us, he was more than just one more person in the lifeboat, one more person to be rescued. When the Word became flesh, God was doing something to humanity itself. In Jesus Christ, God was remaking his human creatures. In his own human body, Jesus was working out salvation for all who would believe. From within the human situation, he was fulfilling all of God’s purposes for humankind. In himself, Jesus brought together the breath of life, which all of humanity shared, brought that together with the God’s own life, God’s own Spirit. In his own body, he re-established what had fallen into death. No longer was humanity dead, for in him was life, true life, eternal life. No longer was humanity estranged from God, for he lived in perfect fellowship with his Father. The breath of life that was breathed into humanity at the beginning he took up in his own lungs. But he also received the eternal Spirit of God, when the Spirit descended upon him at his Baptism and filled him. In his own person, Jesus united the breath of life received from Adam, and the eternal Spirit of God.

And at the end of his life, when Jesus breathed his last, he would commend this Spirit to the Father. As Father Green said in his Good Friday sermon, Jesus did this with the words of a children’s bedtime prayer: “Into your hands O Lord, I commend my spirit.” With these words, Jesus also entrusted his own human life into his Father’s hands. So his whole life, from his conception to his death, was a life lived in the duality of human breath and the power of the Spirit of God. And precisely in this union, precisely by bringing together human breath and the Spirit of God, the whole of Christ’s life was re-establishing humanity, was forging a new way for humanity to be.

But it remains to be said: what has this to do with us? Jesus may have forged a new humanity in himself, but what has this to do with us? Can his humanity somehow be given to us? This recreated human life, filled with the breath of life and the eternal life-giving Spirit, can it be shared with us? There was a preacher who once said that original sin is the doctrine that has the most empirical evidence backing it up. Adam’s fall into sin and death sure passed on to everyone after him. Can the last Adam’s new humanity be shared? Can we receive Christ’s holy humanity? His resurrected humanity?
Historically, today is called Quasimodogeniti Sunday. Perhaps some of you would remember the name of the bell-ringer from Victor Hugo’s novel, The Hunchback of Notre Dame. I have not read it, but I have seen the animated film. His name was Quasimodo. He was given that name because, as a baby, he was abandoned at Notre Dame cathedral on the first Sunday after Easter: Quasimodogeniti Sunday.

That mouthful of a word, Quasimodogeniti, means “like newborn babes.” It comes from 1 Peter 2:2, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2 RSV). So why is this first Sunday after Christ’s resurrection given that name?

It is because of our Gospel lesson. The same Gospel lesson is appointed for all three years of our lectionary. The epistle lesson changes, the psalm changes, even the reading from Acts changes. But this is always our Gospel lesson for the first Sunday after Easter.

Our Gospel lesson takes place on the very evening after the resurrection. For us it has been a week since Easter morning, but for the disciples in the story, it has been but mere hours. Where our lesson picks up the story, the disciples are experiencing darkness for the first time since they heard news that Jesus was raised from the dead. And in this darkness, they are afraid, afraid for their lives—huddling behind closed and locked doors.

But in the midst of this darkness, in the midst of their fear, Jesus comes to them, he appears in their midst. Jesus is not hindered by closed and locked doors, just as he will not be hindered by the fear of the disciples. As we see when Jesus comes to Thomas, neither will Jesus be hindered by the unbelief of his disciples. Nothing in this world can stop Jesus. Nothing can hinder him, for he has gone through death. He has been to hell and back, and defeated all that would set itself up in opposition to God’s love for his creation. From the cross he cried, “It is finished.” And indeed, it was. He was victorious. He took his humanity where it had never gone before: to the utmost end of love for his Father and love for his neighbor. And the Resurrection is the Father’s vindication of this victory, the victory of the love of Jesus over our own murderous hatred, the victory of Jesus’ life over the death that we had all chosen and that we had all been bound in.

And on this first evening after the resurrection, Jesus appears in the midst of his little ragtag group of frightened disciples to show that what he accomplished was done for them, and it will be given to them, shared with them. This first evening after Christ’s emergence from the tomb, Jesus re-enacts what took place at the beginning of human history. Jesus takes a small
group of insignificant, frightened, powerless people, a group that is little more
than but dust in the eyes of the world, and he breathes on them. As our text
says, “[Jesus] breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”
(John 20:22 RSV). As only the one who created humanity in the first place
could do, Jesus once again gives the breath of life to humanity. But now, when
Jesus gives it, he gives the life that is his, that is in himself. The breath that he
gives is now filled with the fullness of God, is now filled with God’s own Spirit.

So on the evening of the resurrection, Jesus is sharing his re-created humanity
with his disciples. And this newly created humanity is but minutes old. This
new human community is, as this Sunday is called, like a newborn babe,
breathing life for the very first time through the Spirit that Jesus bestows.

The resurrection means that his humanity can and will be shared. The
resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the new humanity he established can
be ours. Jesus shares his new humanity, the recreated humanity, by giving of
the same Spirit by which he was made human, the same Spirit that filled him
in Baptism, the same Spirit that he commended to his Father. On the cross,
Jesus entrusted his Spirit to the Father, now it is as if Jesus entrusts this same
Spirit to his disciples. By sharing this Spirit, by breathing on them, they share
in the new humanity.

So we see that Jesus is willing to share this newly created humanity, this
humanity filled with the very life of God. We see that Jesus shared it with the
disciples that first day of the resurrection. But what about for us? Where is
this breath of life to be found?

Our story is not just the story of Christ giving his Spirit, giving the life of the
new creation, to those first disciples. This story is also Jesus giving the means
for this new life to be given to the rest of the world, including you and me.
Jesus appears in the midst of his disciples, unlooked for, unexpected. When he
appears, our text says, “[Jesus] breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive
the Holy Spirit.’” Jesus gives the Spirit of eternal life to his disciples. But then
Jesus immediately after gives the means for this gift to be given to the rest of
us. Jesus says to them: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you
retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22–23 RSV). This is no small
promise. To have one’s sins forgiven is not different from receiving eternal
life, from receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus himself. To have your sins
forgiven is to be found in Christ, to be a member of his living body, to be a
part of the new creation. Jesus’ words on Maundy Thursday place forgiveness
of sins right at the heart of what takes place at this table. The blood of Christ
is shed, and the cup of wine shared, for the forgiveness of sins. And precisely
there is where we encounter the resurrected Christ, where he appears in our
midst no matter what doors may be locked, even if these doors are in our hearts or in our minds. He appears in our midst to forgive our sins, and to give us his Spirit, banishing our fears and our doubts all at once.

So whenever we encounter Christ, in his Word, in his sacraments, in the word of forgiveness from the mouth of our pastor, in the word of forgiveness from one another, Jesus is breathing out his life upon us, he is giving us a share in his Spirit, which is always the Spirit of his resurrection, the Spirit of the new creation. The Church, that is, you and I, have been filled with this Spirit, and we are constantly receiving Christ’s own human life, the life of the new humanity.

The Church is the place where the new creation is taking place. The Church is the place where humanity is being re-founded, re-established—where the new humanity flows down into each of us from Jesus Christ himself. Contrary to all vision, contrary to all physical description, Jesus Christ is in our midst.

It is with this assurance that Jesus sends us out into this world. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus says to us, “even so I send you” (John 20:21 RSV). As God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, Christ is in his Church, beckoning the world to come and share in the new humanity, to share in the new creation, to share in Christ’s own life and Spirit, the Spirit of his resurrection. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you,” proclaim to the entire world that Christ is risen from the dead. Go into all the world, proclaiming this good news, so that, as the end of our reading says, so that the world “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31 RSV).

To him be all glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. Amen