

Pentecost: The *Real* Easter

D. Seiple

Licensed Minister

Broadway United Church of Christ

May 27, 2007

Texts:

Acts 2:1-13

John 14:15-17, 25-27

Acts 2

²When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

John 14

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

²⁵ 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to

you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Some mornings, my alarm clock goes off, and I awake in Genesis. Now I don't mean that I awake in a brand new day, facing the exciting genesis of what's to come in the next 24 hours. I like to do that, I actually do it sometimes, – but no, what I mean is that I awake in the Book of Genesis. Chapter 11, to be exact. Especially as the warm weather is now upon us, and I lean out from my upper story window and take in the sounds of the moving populace – the crowd of early risers scurrying down my sidewalk . Sometimes I catch a few words being shouted to their children or hurled at the crawling traffic. And more than likely, I can't understand what's being said. Not just because I'm up so high, but because the City itself is a blooming buzz of many tongues, and I live in a block that shouts in more than one. As I look down on that street, sometimes it seems as if I live in a veritable Tower of Babel.

Is this what Pentecost was like? The Tower of Babel? Apparently something like this would be happening at Corinth not too many years after the events depicted in our reading from Acts -- during the ministry of the Apostle Paul. In a passage from 1 Corinthians which we did not read for today, Paul warns his congregation against the unrestrained practice of speaking in tongues: for when visitors enter such a worship space, and hear all this hullabaloo, they'll think these Christians are out of their minds. Babel, New Testament style. And that's the way Pentecost is sometimes portrayed: as the descent of a mysterious power given to a few who babble on, like crazed lunatics. There are entire denominations centered around such an understanding.

But that's not how Acts reports the original event. If you listened closely to the passage, you will have already noticed that in Acts, speaking in different tongues at Pentecost is no barrier to mutual understanding. Speaking in tongues is actually a guarantee of it. What happens at Jerusalem that day, the story tells us, is not incoherent babble. The assembled multitude is astonished just because all of a sudden, they are hearing the gospel – “God’s deeds of power” -- in their very own language. It’s not “babble” at all.

Now I think this makes an important point. For Pentecost was the inauguration of the Christian mission to the many-tongued gentiles. That task was to witness, before all of humankind, to the power of the gospel. And this was possible only because the message could be said and heard in the idiom of the listener. Sin itself is no match for the gospel message when that message really strikes us with its full force, and this cannot happen for any of us unless we understand what it’s saying and what it means to us, at the most intimate and personal level. God is still speaking to the world, but we in the world hear in our own way. So what really happened in the Pentecost story, I think, is a testimony to the diversity in the church and the efforts we take to be inclusive in our ways of speaking – so that no matter where folks are on life’s journey, the message should be celebrated in ways that can reach where they really are.

But Pentecost is also an indication of something else. The Crucifixion and Resurrection events, along with Christmas, are supposed to be the major moments in the Christian calendar. I don’t think this is quite right – or at least it’s not the full story -- and today I want to say why.

I grew up a Methodist, and in my home church as a boy, Pentecost was no big deal. I wasn't even sure what the strange word meant until well after I entered college and took my first New Testament course. "Pentecost" – not a word that tripped off the tongue of anyone in my 7th grade confirmation class. The big event – after the ravishingly sumptuous parade of gifts under the glittering Christmas tree, of course – was Easter. And, oh yes, Good Friday – sort of. But Good Friday was a real problem for me as a boy. I could never quite understand what was "good" about having to sit in church for three hours on a Friday afternoon, listening to an endless operatic rendition of verses about nailing a poor guy to a piece of wood. It made me pretty squeamish, and I wondered how anything at all could turn this into something "good." And I think that the first Christians thought this is well, and I suspect that they thought this long after Easter morning had passed.

At the time, I thought that such dark, lingering feelings over Good Friday were just my problem, and I thought it was a problem I shouldn't be having. A real Christian wasn't supposed to be having these doubts. I knew this because of the ways I was most vividly instructed in the Christian story, and it wasn't by the minister in my rather sleepy suburban church. It was by Hollywood. I'd sit transfixed to the images of Max von Sydow and Jeffrey Hunter – the King of Kings was surely the Greatest Story Ever Told! – and on Easter morning, there right on the screen, a shaft of smartly-positioned lighting and a schmaltzy background orchestra would, for just a time, dissipate all my childhood doubts about Good Friday. The cinematic resurrection was indeed a joyful event, and I had the actual eyewitness account right there in front of me. Why couldn't I see all this the way they did, after I left the theatre? Easter morning in Hollywood was such a warm and comforting sunrise.

This sense of things followed me even into high school. On my first trip to Europe, I decided to do a little pilgrimage out beyond the walls of Rome, out there on the Appian Way, because I remembered so vividly St Peter doing this same journey. How could I remember that so vividly? Was I there?! Well, yes, in a way, I was, right

along side everyone else in that movie theater. What a performance! “Finlay Currie for *Quo Vadis*, 1951, Mervyn Leroy, Director.” I found the Quo Vadis chapel, with the actual imprints of St Peter’s feet! It made my own aching ankles tremble just a bit -- though by that point after a very long afternoon’s trek, there may have been other reasons for the spasms down my hamstring, and it took me quite a while to discover, later, that the film had originally been commissioned by Benito Mussolini. At the time, though, I was still in the thrall of what I was just sure that Easter morning must have been like for all of those better Christians than I.

Well I no longer think the same way about the first Easter, and not just because those first Christians didn’t have Twentieth Century Fox to do the screen writing. For when we look underneath the writing we do have, I think we detect something quite different. In the gospel of John, for example, Jesus promises to send “another Comforter.” Why another Comforter? Why wasn’t one fabulous Easter good enough, if it was going to be such an astonishingly reassuring event?

The Answer? *It wasn’t!!* Easter was not such a reassuring event – at least, it must not have seemed that way the first time around. The earliest gospel account we have – the first version of the gospel of Mark – ended this way: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Period. End of story. Full stop. “They said nothing to anyone... they were afraid.” No joyful women rushing back to shout the good news to Peter and company. No scurrying back in amazed hope at the miracle that had just lifted them up. No appearance of the risen Lord. They fled the scene because they were afraid. It’s enough to make doubting Thomases of every one of them. And I suspect it may have, and that’s why the doubting Thomas story is in the Scriptures at all. It’s there because the writer of the gospel knew that so many in the community were doubters.

What does this tell us? I think it tells us about what lies between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Between Friday and Sunday, we pass through the tomb. And it may take a long time to do this -- an entire lifetime perhaps. The story of these three events – Crucifixion, Tomb, and Resurrection of Jesus -- is really the story told by the lives we live, and though I'd hate to make an absolute generalization on this, I suspect that many of us – most of us, perhaps – spend a fair amount of time in crucifixions and tombs, where simply hearing that Jesus has been raised from the dead may not raise us right away into the life we'd rather have. Easter Saturday can be a very long day.

And even after we get what happened on Sunday, we may not like what we find on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. For when we understand just what new life the Resurrection is calling us to behold, we may also begin to understand just what cost our discipleship is calling us to bear. Worldly comforts no longer speak to us in quite the same way: God's wisdom is the world's foolishness, and sometimes this doesn't feel like good news.

I'll quote from that little book many of us read with Pastor James at Lent: *Living with the Mind of Christ*, by James A. Harnish. You remember being reminded us that “the Christian faith is not about making minor adjustments on the exterior of our lives. Becoming a follower of Jesus requires a radical transformation of our thinking that results in an equally radical transformation of our living. It calls for nothing less than a mental transplant, in which the mind-set with which Jesus came into this world, lived, died, and rose again becomes the mind-set by which we live, with which we die, and through which we are raised to new life.” But new life does not happen unless we pass through the tomb, and that does not seem like good news while we are stuck there.

So isn't this why we need a Comforter? Isn't this why Pentecost is so important? If Easter is the moment when the resurrection becomes actual for Jesus, Pentecost is the moment when resurrection's power becomes real for us. For us, perhaps Pentecost is the real Easter. And if the experience of the first Christians is any indication, we may have to wait for that to happen, and we may need continual reoccurrences after it does. Perhaps that's why the moment at Pentecost keeps recurring in the book of Acts – in chapter 8 and chapter 11 and chapter 19 – and that's why it needs to keep recurring in our own community, right here at Broadway. *That* will keep our hope alive.