

Sermon: What Goes Up  
Text: Acts 2:1-13  
Date: May 20, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
Pentecost  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another,  
“What does this mean?”*

Acts 2:12

I have made the point from this pulpit before that in scripture it's questions, not answers, that drive the biblical narrative forward.

*Who shall I say sent me*, Moses asks the voice that calls to him from the burning bush, and insists that he confront the most powerful man on earth equipped with nothing more than a walking stick.

*How can this be*, Mary inquires of Gabriel when the legendary archangel discloses to her the starring role she will play in the Advent of God's incarnate love on earth.

*Who do you say that I am* Jesus asks his disciples, just as he is about to make the turn toward Jerusalem on the road toward his destiny.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me* Jesus asks the One who set him on this road, when it becomes clear that his audacious mission, his love-based insurgency, will cost him everything.

I didn't realize until this week that the author of the book of Acts deploys another one of these narrative-driving questions. And he does this right at the beginning of this riveting account of the birth, life and ministry of the early church.

In all my years of reading and studying the book of Acts, I've always overlooked the question because there is so much else going on in this passage.

This seeming innocuous query gets obscured by a blast of violent wind, by the eruption of tongues of fire, by the explosion of foreign languages that turn this orderly gathering of Jewish celebrants into a cacophony of the world's cultures.

But there it is, right at the end: "What does this mean?"

What's notable about the question is that it's not about the more dramatic phenomena of the day. It's not about the rushing wind that tears the shutters clean off the windows.

It's about language. It's not about tongues of fire shooting out from people's head; it's about the foreign tongues being spoken by the people in the crowd.

It turns out it's a profound question. And the answer has enormous implications for the church.

But to understand it, we have to back up just a wee bit.

We have to remember that the Acts of the Apostles, as the book is formally known, is written by Luke. It's a sequel to his story about a boundary-breaking revolutionary come to show the world what God's boundless love looks like, a follow-up to his extraordinary gospel narrative built around the astonishing good news that everyone belongs in the circle of that love.

As we saw last week, in the very first chapter of the sequel, this same revolutionary, this same Jesus, disappears.

He gives the disciples one final charge:

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Then he just begins to float up, and up and up and away from them, until he disappears forever.

In the very next chapter, all heaven breaks loose. Not unlike the story of creation, it's utter chaos that day---a howling wind blows and there is fire in the house. Which is to say, this is an origin story.

Not the chaos of creation in Genesis. But the chaos of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Not gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, given in homage of the infant Jesus, but wind and flame and a cacophony of languages, which signify the gift of the Holy Spirit herself, given to the whole world.

What Luke is trying to tell is that, yes, the Risen Christ has left the building, and exited the story. But what goes up, must indeed come back down.

*What does this mean?*

It means that the church that was brought so vividly to life that day was born to continue to embody Christ's mission. To realize his universal vision, to extend his love and welcome to all people, everywhere:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

It's an overwhelming celebration of diversity, an unambiguous affirmation of the world's dazzlingly different cultures.

The problem, today, in a nutshell, may be that we have traded in this universal vision for something much easier to realize, something much, much smaller in scope.

In her professional life, Debie Thomas is a writer for *Journey with Jesus*, a self-described "weekly webzine for the global church". Today, she is a gifted and a theologically mature writer.

When she was a junior in college she was on the student staff of Intersarsity Christian Fellowship, an evangelical ministry devoted in large part to converting secular college students to the Christian faith.

She tells the story about how, through the ministry of Intersarsity, one of her classmates -- call her Mia -- gave her life to Christ.

As Debie tells the story, Mia "cried with joy as she shared her conversion experience with the thirty or so of us who had gathered for worship. As we witnessed her first, trembling moments of faith, we cried, too."\*

But after the service something sort of strange happened, something Debie did not expect.

Her friend Katie, one of her close cohorts in Intervarsity, looked troubled.

Debie invited Katie to go for a walk. "What is it?" she asked her friend.

"I'm happy [for Mia] Katie blurted out, sounding a little defensive. "I'm happy for her, I promise."

"I believe you," I said. "But...?"

As Debie writes, she and Katie "had witnessed the twists and turns of Mia's faith journey for months.

"As Intervarsity leaders that year, [they] had participated in an "inquirer's" Bible study with Mia, answered her questions about Christianity as best as could, and prayed that she'd somehow sense God's love. I was surprised, therefore, that Katie felt less than thrilled about Mia's decision.

"I believe you. But...?"

"But I'm afraid of what will happen now," Katie replied. "Mia's such a fascinating person. I'm afraid she'll become, well, boring."

Debie had to admit it was true. "Mia was a fascinating person," she writes "She was a deep soul, a contemplative, an artist, and a dancer. She worked with textiles, and talked about fabrics and threads the way a religious person might talk about icons. Dance was, for her, a kind of worship. Unlike many of us who'd grown up in the church, she had a way of approaching spiritual things that was refreshingly unorthodox.

"She's going to start talking Christian soon," Katie continued with a sigh. "Just wait and see. In a few months, all she'll speak is Christianese."

I tell this story for two reasons. First because this same thing happened to me.

When I was in high school I traded in my mother tongue -- a language about basketball and music and the classes I loved in school -- for the language of the church, a language none of my friends, or teammates, or classmates spoke. Which essentially left me unable to communicate with them.

And second because a church that speaks just one language is not a Pentecostal church.

If the church today in America is in trouble, maybe that's partly why: Because we've reduced the Christian faith -- a story about the infinite God -- to just one mother tongue: Christianese.

It's ultimate irony because the story of Pentecost makes perfectly clear that takes all the world's languages to tell this astonishing story, including non-verbal languages like dance and art and music.

But it doesn't just take language. As we heard yesterday in Bishop Curry's remarkable sermon at the Royal Wedding, a sermon he could just as easily have preached today, on Pentecost, it takes fire too.

The same fire that animated the early church: the fire of love. A fire that causes timid disciples to become ambassadors and apostles to the world.

The fire of love that powers the sun.

The fire of love that turned water into wine and multiplied loaves and loaves and fished.

The fire of love that brought Lazarus up and out the grave and raised Jesus himself from the dead.

The fire of love which is the very Spirit of God, which is why we pray and sing,  
**Come Holy Spirit, Come!**

\*This story can be found in full at *Journey with Jesus*, May 17, 2015.