

“Completing Easter”

Acts 2:1-21, Genesis 11:1-9

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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Thirty-one years ago last week, on a joyful sunny day in New York, surrounded by loving family and friends, Erin and I got married. Soon after the ceremony we took off for our honeymoon in Montreal and Quebec City. We drove into Montreal, which as I’m sure all of you know, is in the part of Canada that is French-speaking. But Montreal is a large, international city and from our guidebook, we knew that about 2/3 of the people there were French-speaking as a first language. So we knew that there must be plenty of English speakers there, right? I mean, this is Canada, not Europe. But when we drove up to the hotel the very first day, the man at the desk spoke to us in French and seemed offended that we didn’t speak French. Not a very friendly welcome. A couple of days later we drove to Quebec City, where we knew that 95% of the people had French as their first language. But although the language barrier was greater, the people were far friendlier and worked with us to overcome any barriers that language caused.

Have you ever been in another country where you didn’t speak the language? Or have you ever encountered someone here who did not know English and was struggling to make themselves understood? The barriers of language, they’re all around us, aren’t they? It seems to be one of the things that separates peoples from one another. They can’t talk to each other, they can’t understand each other. I’ve always thought that one of the saddest passages in the Bible is the story of the tower of Babel. Wouldn’t it be great if that had never happened? Wouldn’t it be great if we had the same language? This last Thursday was the birthday of C.K. Ogden, a British linguist and author and translator born in 1889. After writing several books and after the First World War, and after co-writing *The Meaning of Meaning*, a work that examined the influence of language on thought, the remainder of

Ogden's career was focused on the creation and advocacy of "Basic English." Also known as Simple English, Basic is a simplified version of English that Ogden believed could become a universal language; there was a vocabulary of 850 words, only 18 of which were verbs or, as Ogden called them, "operators." Basic English was the solution to the problem of miscommunication and misunderstanding, Ogden believed, and could achieve world peace. Although it gained some popularity after H.G. Wells and George Orwell both wrote in its favor, Orwell changed his mind about it, and used it in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the model for "Newspeak," the state-sanctioned language that has no words to express original thought. Basic English wasn't going to work. Although there are 196 countries in the world today, we think there are 7,097 separate languages. A common language wasn't going to work. We couldn't undo Babel.

I've also often thought that Pentecost was a counterpoint to Babel; at the tower of Babel all the languages were created and understanding became confused. But at Pentecost, everyone all of a sudden understood, they all heard and understood the good news that the disciples were preaching. Could Pentecost complete what had come undone at Babel? Well, not really. As the pastor and scholar Debra Dean Murphy says:

"In truth, Pentecost is not the complete reversal of Babel. We still can't understand each other; we routinely miscommunicate; we gather and we gripe, betraying the unity Christ has called us to as his Body. But the good news of the Acts 2 story, the good news of all our gathering "together in one place," is not that the Church has a mission, but that God's mission has a Church. We assemble to be dispersed, to be mistaken for the drunken fools for Christ that we are, to speak and to act not by our own wits, thanks be to God, but through the Spirit's life-giving power so that everyone, *everyone*, who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."¹

The Pentecost miracle is not that we can now all speak the same language, it is not the completion of Babel. It is actually the completion of Easter. It was a miracle at Easter that Jesus was raised from the dead and now through the great 50 days he has been around teaching his disciples. But they are still the same fearful men and women that they were before Easter. What changed? To me this has been one

1 Murphy, Debra Dean. "[Assembling in the Spirit](#)," Debra Dean Murphy, *Ekklesia Project*, 2012.

of the most convincing proofs of the resurrection of Jesus; not that the tomb was empty, or the appearances to the disciples that they witness to, but the change in their behavior. Before Easter they were hiding in fear of their lives. After Pentecost, they don't seem to care anymore. Something happens at Pentecost that completes the miracle of Easter. They have seen the risen Christ and now the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they become different. They become convinced that they will be raised the same as Jesus. They have changed and are ready to go to all corners of the world, whatever the language and spread the good news of God's love in Christ. That's the miracle of Pentecost.

I know a lot of you have been touched, as I have, by what happened on a train in Portland, Oregon last week. "A white man riding on that train on Friday began screaming anti-Muslim insults at a black 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old Muslim friend wearing a hijab. One can imagine people pretending not to hear and staring fiercely down at their phones; instead, three brave passengers stepped forward to protect the girls.

The three were as different as could be. One was a 23-year-old recent Reed College graduate who had a mane of long hair and was working as a consultant. Another was a 53-year-old Army veteran with the trimmest of haircuts and a record of service in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third was a 21-year-old poet and Portland State University student on his way to a job at a pizzeria. What united the three was decency.

When they intervened, the man harassing the girls pulled a knife and slashed the three men before fleeing. Rick Best, the veteran, died at the scene. Taliesin Namkai-Meche, the recent Reed graduate, was conscious as he waited for an ambulance. A good Samaritan took off her shirt to cover him; she recounted that some of his last words were: "I want everybody on the train to know, I love them." He died soon after arriving at the hospital. Another passer-by stanching the bleeding of the student poet, Micah Fletcher, and called his mother to tell her to go to the hospital — but played down the injuries to

avoid terrifying her. Fletcher underwent two hours of surgery to remove bone fragments from his throat and is recovering. After coming out of surgery, weak but indomitable, Fletcher wrote a poem that offers us guidance.

According to the Oregonian, it read in part:

"I, am alive.

I spat in the eye of hate and lived.

This is what we must do for one another

We must live for one another."²

I really have no idea whether any of those three were followers of Jesus, but it may not matter. They, and the good Samaritans who helped them, display what is best in our society, in a moment when the worst was also being demonstrated. They acted out of love, love for a stranger. That's what the church does at its best as well. We walk into danger, we risk ourselves, our finances, our building, by giving ourselves away in love. When the disciples walked out of that upper room, that's what they were walking out to do. To complete the miracle of Easter—to give ourselves in love as Christ had given himself in love.

2 Kristoff, Nicholas. New York Times, June 1, 2017