"Why are We Still Singing Easter Hymns?"
Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut
The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

The white drape on the cross is gone. The Paschal Candle is gone. The lilies are gone. Gone are the bells, the trumpet, the flowering cross.

So why are we still singing Easter hymns? It is because as Avery and Marsh penned many years ago, "Every morning is Easter morning from now own, every day's Resurrection Day, the past is over and gone." Amen! It's why most Christians worship on Sunday as the resurrection of Christ replaced the Hebrew Sabbath as the central day of honoring God. On Sundays we remember that the new life in Christ never gets old and has for 2,000 years inspired the followers of Christ with the new possibility of life lived in him.

We also sing Easter hymns because of the close tie Easter has to this Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish agricultural festival on which the first fruits of harvest were brought to the temple to honor God. Yet Dr. Luke's testimony in Acts 2 makes it clear that the birthday of the Christian Church was no ordinary Jewish harvest festival! The Pentecost pandemonium of tongues of fire, rushing wind and the cacophony of a multiplicity of languages must have sounded like last Tuesday's tornado. Exciting! Scary! Energizing! After all, those gathered were "amazed and astonished." (2:7)

For those first disciples on that first Pentecost, this energy was the fulfillment of a promise. Jesus promised them the Holy Spirit: "Wait in the city," he said, "until you are clothed with power from on high." And as we heard in today's Gospel, that promise was not just a post-Easter Day promise at the end of Christ's 40 days of earthly resurrection. It was also a

promise he gave to them on the darkest, longest night of his life: the night before he died. The Advocate, the Spirit of Truth – other names for the Holy Spirit - that he promised them that night have now come full force on the Day of Pentecost to stiffen their backbones, get them out of their hideaway and into the public square.

And why is that? Because it is to be expected that the world, even the religious world, will persecute the followers of Christ. On that first Pentecost there were skeptics and scoffers. The naysayers said "Those enthusiastic, idealistic, demonstrative people: they're drunk." St. Peter had to remind them that all of this was predicted by the prophet Joel: the (Holy) Spirit would be poured out on all. All people. No exceptions.

This is why all the languages and cultures are mentioned by name, much to the anxiety and consternation of liturgists everywhere. These names that we sometimes stumble over – Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia; Elamites and Parthians and residents of Mesopotamia – are named because Dr. Luke wants to make it clear that everyone hears, in their own language, God's deeds of power.

And here's another thing. Pentecost reverses the Curse. No, not *that* curse. Boston did that in 2004, much to the consternation of Yankee fans everywhere. (See me if you're not a baseball fan and I'll fill you in.) I'm talking about the curse of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis. In building the Tower of Babel the people were trying to usurp the place of God, so God confused our language that we might know again that God is God. Now, in this marvelous Pentecost reversal, God uses the diversity of language and culture to deliver one powerful message of unity through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Still, as with the first Pentecost, there are skeptics and scoffers today. "Reinforce the borders, draw in the barricades,

and circle the wagons" is the base message. Make sure that folks that don't look/sound/act/emote like me are excluded. Live in fear. This is the world's way.

The Church's way, the way of the Spirit, is as it has always been: to live in faith, to draw the circle wide and hear in our own languages about God's deeds of power (2:11). Pentecost is Easter, but magnified from a small band of chosen followers to the "all flesh" of the prophet Joel (2:17).

That message resonated in the first century, notwithstanding attempts of the Roman Empire to harass and persecute the early Christians. The Church grew quickly, on fire with the power of the Holy Spirit but also with the power of changed lives. I'm always disappointed on Pentecost that we stop reading the story at verse 21 because Peter, like most preachers, keeps on preaching. He preaches for conversion and he preaches for a response and he gets it in verse 37: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.""

Repentance is not bad news, much as we might be inclined to think so. In the original Bible Greek it is *metanoia*, *literally*, "to turn around," away from destruction and toward life.

What does that mean for us? At a personal level, this is a personal decision. Each of us must wrestle with that which draws us away from God. We know all the idols, right? Greed, power, lust, addictions, pride, envy, ill-will. Easter reminds us that we are called to be dead to these sins and alive to God in Jesus Christ.

So Pentecost magnifies this to a corporate level. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, continues the promise of the resurrected Christ by magnifying it to reach the whole world. Too often we in the church act as if we are sitting inside my 4 cylinder Toyota Yaris, when we are actually behind the wheel of a 8 cylinder RAM pick-up. Charles Spurgeon was a 19th century revival preacher who was asked to preach a sermon defending the Bible. He is reported to have replied: "Defend the Bible? I would sooner defend a lion. Just unloose him and let him go!"

If the Church is waning in influence, what are we doing about it? Are we reconnecting to the power of the Spirit? Or do we number among those of whom G.K. Chesterton spoke when he said: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried"?

The obvious but bland conclusion to this message is to challenge you to engage this ministry or that. I could do that. And in your mind you might go "yadda-yadda-yadda" or make a grocery list or possibly – possibly – be provoked to consider something I suggest. I welcome conversations with those being nudged by God through the Spirit to deeper response.

A different approach might be to be open to the Spirit entering your life in new, unexpected, unplanned, interrupting yet perfectly delightful ways. That happened to me this week, and I have permission to tell the story I'm about to tell.

I was about 2/3 of the way done writing this message when Sarah O'Brien called to ask if she could stop in. I didn't have time, of course. I had important things to do. That's the lie I told myself for a nanosecond before I said, "Sure, Sarah, come on over." It turns out she was coming fresh from a meeting with Julie Nash, the city's economic director and a member of our church, in which they talked about Sarah's professional aspirations and ideas she has to develop Pride for the city. So here's Sarah, 18, home for the summer but thinking

for the long-term, getting re-involved in our Gay-Straight Alliance ministry and thinking how she can make a positive difference in the city and the church, all the while – as she said to me – outside her comfort zone. Good!

I can't imagine it was in the disciples comfort zone, either, to answer the Spirit's call, but they did. And so can we. As we will sing in just a few moments:

"Filled with the Spirit's power, with one accord the infant church confessed its risen Lord. O Holy Spirit, in the church today no less your power of fellowship display."

"Widen our love, good Spirit, to embrace in your strong care all those of every race. Link wind and fire with life among us move, till we are known as Christ's, and Christians prove."