In the final session of the Introduction to the New Testament course that I teach, I ask my students what they’ve learned about the historical Jesus. They can recount what our gospels say, painting a slim portrait from the broader picture of the early church’s accounts. And of the resurrected Jesus? What proof do we have? None of the gospel accounts record the event of the resurrection. We are left with a few appearance stories and an empty tomb. We hear that the crucified criminal from a backwater province in the eastern Roman empire is now a missing body. The proof, I posture, is sitting in the classroom. The proof is sitting in the pew. The proof, as Acts of the Apostles attempts to explain, is the unlikely development of the Christian community. Something changed the fearful followers into faithful evangelists. God’s raising Jesus from the dead is witnessed by believers who are then strengthened by coming of the Spirit. As we celebrate the feast of Pentecost this month, I offer here some reflections to inspire our preaching and prayer.

The first chapter of Acts of the Apostles opens with the resurrected Jesus meeting with the group of apostles and disciples, presumably in the upper room. He promises them, “You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NAB). Then after his ascension, they return to the room. Inspired by Peter, they draw lots to fill the now vacant position left by the betrayal and death of Judas. Matthias is chosen and enrolled as one among the eleven apostles.

When chapter 2 opens, some time has lapsed. Passover is long gone and Pentecost is “being fulfilled.” While everyone else is celebrating a joyful festival, these folks find themselves again in the upper room. They are not coming together according to some prearranged meeting. They are not following a schedule.

Something else is drawing them. I would propose that something is both external and internal.

The Scripture says it is the feast of Pentecost. We can presume that these apostles and disciples have not been living together in that one room all this time, but rather, have returned to Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot, which begins fifty days after Passover. This pilgrim feast, also called the Festival of Weeks, celebrated the first fruits of the field. While the Temple was still standing, farmers brought their gifts in

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thanksgiving to God. In the first century, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot were the three festivals that brought Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem. Originally, these were ancient agricultural feasts celebrating the harvests of barley, wheat, and produce, respectively. Later they became associated with various moments in Israel’s salvation history: the exodus, the giving of the law, and the wanderings in the desert.

Even today in celebration, some observant Jews stay up all night on the eve of Shavuot reading the Torah. Young children are often introduced to the study of Torah during this time. A bit of honey is placed on the first letters that a child is to learn. They then lick the honey so that they come to know that Torah is sweet (see Greenberg, 85–86, and Strassfeld, 253–255). “The statutes of the Lord are true, all of them just; More desirable than gold, than a hoard of purest gold, Sweeter also than honey or drippings from the comb” (Ps 19:10–11). Following rabbinic custom, Shavuot is a dairy meal—filled with blintzes and cheese-cakes.

As the festival was celebrated in the first century, it was most definitely meant to be joyful. It reminded the pilgrims that they were fed from the bounty of the land and strengthened by the word of God. In the second chapter of Acts, the giving of the law on Sinai—the moment at which the wandering former slaves became a people covenanted to God is transformed into the giving of the Spirit—the moment at which we become a people who are to witness to the ends of the earth that Jesus is Lord and Christ.

So, the external impetus to gather is ostensibly the pilgrim feast of Shavuot. But internally, the motivation for these Galileans is much different. It is the first time they have returned to the city of Jerusalem, Jerusalem that killed its prophet, as Jesus had announced (Matt 23:37). We can imagine that this return had little feel of a celebration. The mighty hand of God that had once rescued them from Egypt, as their pilgrim songs echoed, had not brought them to a metaphorical land of milk and honey, but to a place made sour by disappointment and death and sweetened briefly by resurrection and ascension. They had no first fruits of insight. No real understanding of where to go from here. Only a vague idea that they should return to Jerusalem and gather together.

Suddenly. Without warning. Unexpectedly. Incongruous with what preceded. Something happens. It wasn’t planned for. It wasn’t anticipated. In fact, it was incomprehensible without recourse to Scripture. The twelve apostles and the other disciples have gathered together in one place, and, suddenly, a sound is heard. Not a whisper from the room above. Not the sound of muted voices spoken elsewhere. But something like a violent, rushing wind coming down from heaven, filling the entire room where they are sitting.

In this sudden rushing sound, something like—how do you describe the unimagina-
nable, the awesome manifestation of the divine—like flames, like tongues of fire, divides itself and comes to rest above everyone in the room. The Greek says “each one of them.” Not just the Apostles, but everyone one in the room is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel: “It will come to pass in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Upon all flesh. Not just those who are selected. Not just those who are elected. Not just those who are gifted. Not the beautiful people or the right people or the moneyed people. But all people receive the Spirit. This largess of God has never really sat well with some folks. Take an Old Testament example. Recognizing the strain of leading the chosen but grumbling people through the wilderness,
God tells Moses to gather seventy elders to whom will be given a portion of the Spirit that God had placed on Moses. "As the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied" (Num 11:25). A couple of others whose names had been on the list had missed the meeting. The spirit came to rest on them as well. Joshua was indignant:

"Moses, my lord, stop them." But Moses answered him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets! Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!" (Num 11:29)

Would that the LORD might bestow the spirit on them all! The Acts of the Apostles is the narrative realization of that hope. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, these once timid and undirected followers of Jesus are suddenly endowed with the ability to speak. They are able to speak in other tongues—not the charismatic gift of tongues (though that may also have been in Luke's mind), but the gift of languages. Inside the upper room, this motley crew from Galilee, a rag-tag group of fishermen and peasants, suddenly, unexpectedly, can speak other languages.

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language" (Acts 2:5-6). The list of nations from where the pious Jews have assembled is odd. The first few places where folks come from are not within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. In fact, it is the opposite. Parthia, which included parts of Media and Elam, was the archenemy of Rome, and had never been conquered or subsumed under the umbrella of imperial oversight. Some of the other areas listed may have been Roman provinces but they were no show places. Pamphylia—mountainous and filled with prickly tribesmen who did not look kindly on anything Roman. Cappadocia, Pontus—again mountainous and wild as well. What we don’t see are pious Jews coming from more genteel places like Greece. No mention of Philippi or Corinth or even Athens.

These folks have traveled great distances to be present for the festival of Shavuot, and they are utterly amazed that so far from home, they find someone speaking their language. The coming of the Holy Spirit has immediate implications for the proclamation of the Gospel. The disciples are able to communicate beyond the limitation of their own language.

As Acts of the Apostles continues, this evangelical impulse will spread beyond the boundaries of Judah and Samaria and even into the heart of the Empire. With the coming of the Spirit, the disciples are emboldened, given not only the courage but the skills to fulfill Jesus’ command to preach in his name to all the nations (Luke 24:47). From the fearful followers of a crucified criminal to evangelists and martyrs of the Christ of God, Acts of the Apostles points back to the Resurrection and forward to the spread of the faith. Indeed, our proof of the Resurrection is echoed in Jesus’ own words: “You are witnesses to these things” (Luke 24:48).

References
