

**SLD05.23.10 Pentecost**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Acts**  
**John 14:16-20, 25-26**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Come On, Baby, Light My Fire!”**

“If Jesus is risen and people are not finding him, then somebody is hiding him.” writes American Carmelite nun Sister Miriam Elder. “He is not hiding himself. Jesus came to cast fire on the earth and walked Palestine as a Flame so alive with God’s spirit of love,” she says, “that when he was ‘blown out’ on the cross, the Spirit did not die.”<sup>1</sup>

If Jesus is risen and people are not finding him, then somebody is hiding him.

Are you hiding him? Am I? Are we as a church?

Immediately after Jesus’ death, those first disciples were sure hiding him, and themselves, from anything that had to do with Jesus and those who hated him. And no wonder. They were scared. Their plans had failed. Jesus hadn’t turned out to be who they’d expected. And they imagined that the same folks who did Jesus in wanted to do them in, too. Probably not. Probably nobody was even thinking about them. They weren’t that important, or even relevant, now that Jesus was gone.

But Jesus had been the center of the disciples’ universe; how much power and hope and expectation they had projected onto him. And now their center was gone. Dead. Kaput. Humiliated and eradicated.

But then Jesus is resurrected. Comes back, just as he’d promised. It takes a few visits, a few miracles, a few meals, but eventually all the disciples have seen him, some more than once, and genuinely believe he’s back in the game.

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<sup>1</sup> People’s Companion to the Breviary, The Liturgy of the Hours with Inclusive Language, The Carmelites of Indianapolis, 1997. p. 294.

What this means for them they there still not exactly clear. Jesus tries to tell them: show up, stick around, take care of each other, fish for people like *this*, don't underestimate the healing power of a good meal, that sort of thing. But what the disciples *really* want to know is whether or not now's the time they're finally going to get what they hoped for – to flip a finger at the Roman Empire and restore the kingdom to Israel.

Can't you just see Jesus rolling his eyes and heaving a sigh as he gets that, yet again, the disciples still haven't not gotten it. Still haven't gotten *him*.

"Guys, you don't get to know what all God's up to here. But after I'm gone, I'll send you a Friend, a comforter, a helper, a mover and shaker, who'll light a fire under (and over) you to get you witnessing to me. Now, I'm outta here."

And up he ascends, I'm thinking, with relief.

Maybe the disciples remain puzzled on the day Jesus ascends, but not as puzzled as they're fixing to be.

Jesus gone again, they go about regrouping, reorganizing, putting their administrative house in order. It's an age-old impulse: when in doubt, hold a committee meeting.

So there they are, gathered in somebody's living room following Robert's Rules of Order, when suddenly from heaven comes a sound like the rush of a violent wind, filling the entire house where they are sitting. And all of a sudden, and this is *really* disruptive, divided tongues of fire appear among them, and a tongue of fire rests on each one of them. And...the moderator loses all control.

“Look out, your head’s on fire!” he shouts. “Lord have mercy, so is yours!” shouts another. Only nobody exactly understands what each other is saying because the words are coming out funny, in a language not their own, with a passion, a fervor, an intensity not their own. Everyone’s babbling enthusiastically but no one seems to be paying any attention to what anybody else is saying.

To make matters worse, the windows are open and passersby start drawing near to the commotion, trying to figure out what’s going on. Only what do you know but that instead of making fun of the whole dizzy scene, their mouths drop open and some of the them start tearing up, like they’re hearing something they’ve been waiting to hear for a long time. Others just stand there, amazed at what’s happening, and move closer, wanting to learn more.

Some of those gathered are unmoved, of course, and mutter out loud that the disciples are drunk, a notion of which Peter promptly attempts to disabuse them. But the unmoved ones do not hear him, or hearing, do not understand, because understanding has not been given to them. Generations of *their* children will hear tales of the weird behavior of the drunken disciples of some dead guy named Jesus.

The rest of the folks, though, catch on fire from the disciples’ flames and find themselves praising God and wondering what they should do next. And Peter says to them, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you,” says Peter, for you and for your children, and for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to God.”

So those who welcome the Spirit are baptized, and that day about three thousand persons are added to the disciples’ community. And these people devote

themselves to their teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:37-42.)

Thus through the Holy Spirit does Jesus cast fire on his disciples, and through them, on the whole earth. So if people are not finding him, somebody is hiding him; Jesus is not hiding himself.

But why would anyone want to hide the flame of Jesus?

Well, think about it. What can flames do? What have flames done throughout our holy history?

The prophet Malachi describes the messenger of God as refiner's fire, purifying people like gold and silver, burning away dross. "Who will be able to endure the flame when it comes?" asks Malachi. "Who will be able to stand and face it when it appears?" (Malachi 3:2-3)

Fire burns. Purifies. Refines.

The flame of God led the children of Israel through the wilderness, which was sure no cakewalk.

Fire opens the way, but often that way is frightening, difficult, unattractive.

To help settle Elijah's score with the prophets of Baal, the fire of God consumes his burnt offering, as well as the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even the water in the trenches.

Fire consumes.

Terror dances before Job's Leviathan as from its mouth go flaming torches. (Job 41:19-22)

Fire terrifies.

In judgment on Assyria, Isaiah promises that God will come from far away, burning with his anger, ...with a flame of devouring fire. (Is. 30: 27-30) The light of Israel will become a fire, he say, and the Holy One a flame to burn and devour Assyria.

Fire destroys.

In Daniel's dream the Ancient One sits on a throne of fiery flames. (Dan 7:9) In Hebrews, God makes God's servants flames of fire. (He 1:7) In Revelation, the eyes of Son of Man are like a flame of fire. (Rev. 1:14)

Fire awes.

Yet Jesus came to cast fire on the earth, and walked Palestine as a Flame so alive with God's spirit of love that when he was "blown out" on the cross, the Spirit did not die.

And why did the Spirit not die with Jesus' body? Because after he was gone, Jesus sent the Fire of the Spirit to enflame his disciples, who passed the torch to others, who passed it on to us. *You and I* are the flamekeepers now of the flame of Christ's life. It is through *us* that Christ lives.

You know, there exists is an order to this day of "flamekeepers" organized around Brigit the saint and Brighideach (Breed-och) the goddess, which, to these folks, are one and the same. In this order, if one is called by or drawn to St. Brigit, that one is invited to tend her flame, quite literally, to tend the flame of a candle or lantern or campfire, on a regular basis in a cycle of 20 days, and to spend as much of that day as possible in contemplation and prayer.<sup>2</sup>

Not a bad model for those of us called as flamekeepers for Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ordbrighideach.org/faq.htm>

As followers of Christ, this is our spiritual inheritance - to carry and spread the flame of Christ, to tend it and feed it and share it and make sure it stays uncovered and available to anyone who needs or wants it..

In John, Jesus promises to send an Advocate to be with us forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither see it nor knows it. (John 14:16) But we see it and know it because it abides in us, and we in it, and our job, folks, is to keep the darn thing lit, and spread it around!

What might keep us from doing just that?

Well, fire is dangerous and maybe we learned along the way to play it safe.

Fire can destroy and maybe we like things the way they are.

Fire is transformative and maybe some of us have had enough of change.

Fire consumes and maybe we'd rather keep some part of our lives to ourselves.

Fire is passionate and passion, as the disciples revealed, can make people do and say foolish things.

On the other hand, maybe you've got no fire to share anymore. Maybe somewhere along the way your flame got blown out and you haven't figured out how to light it back up.

But because with tongues of fire Jesus entrusted his Spirit to his disciples, and through them, to Christ's body on earth, the Church, one of the Church's jobs is to uncover that hidden fire in each of us, or re-spark it, if necessary, and tend and nourish and share it until Christ makes of a faith community a human conflagration of gospel truth that warms and transforms the world around it.

On that first Pentecost, flames of fire burned over the disciples and they spoke and acted as the Spirit gave utterance.

Fiercely, steadily, patiently, flames of fire burn over, and around, and within, each one of us, urging us to speak and act as the Spirit gives utterance.

What language of the Spirit is burning to be spoken through us? What action, what risk, what goofy, jubilant behavior is burning for release? What might we do for our neighbors regard us as on fire with the gospel, drunk with gospel joy?

(Boy, would that ever take 'em by surprise.)

((Boy, would that ever take *us* by surprise!))

Our job as a church is to fan those flames of Holy Spirit burning within and around all of us until the warmth and welcome, the humility and hope, of the flaming Body of Christ church is unmistakable...inescapable... irresistible...to anyone who draws near.

Some will say we're drunk on our own dreams, our own delusions. But we know we'll live forever in the One whose fire cannot be extinguished. Some will say, "I got no fire to give." And as Albert Schweitzer once observed, "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person." But igniting another's flame doesn't diminish our own. Caring begets caring. Love begets love. From you I receive. To you I give. Together we share, from this we live.

So maybe, instead of doing our best to avoid the fire, we should be stepping closer to it. Blow on it. Add some kindling. Spread it around.

Maybe we should even ask Jesus to rake us over His coals again!

Jesus passed the Fire of God's love to his disciples, and they, to us, and us, to others. For it is in the fire of our own faith where Christ is risen; the flame of our own yearning, where he lives. *This* is the little light, of yours, of mine, that the church is called to shine.

If Jesus is risen and people are not finding him, then somebody is hiding him.  
Don't let it be us.

To the glory of God. Amen.