

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois**  
**Pentecost Sunday**  
**May 15 , 2016**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**  
**Texts--Acts 2: 1-21**

This is a day of celebration—of red flags waving, doves flying, other unexpected processional spectacles that help us bring to mind some sense of the atmosphere in Jerusalem that day so many, many years ago. The crowds and the languages mixing together and sometimes clashing. The believers back in their upper room waiting for the Advocate, the One who was to come to them now that Jesus had returned to God.

This is a day that brings to an end the fifty days of the Easter season—an ending and yet a beginning, one that we often call the “birthday of the church” the day when the church **came alive** by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not a quiet and gentle story! There are powerful images here—images of sight and of sound—the rush of the mighty wind, the tongues as of fire—dangerous, scorching hot, uncontrollable--that seemed to perch right on the disciples’ heads bursting them right out of that room and into the city streets where they prophesied, where people heard and understood, where many were then baptized, and they became one.

This is what the church has celebrated for years and what we continue today. Drawn from this first part of the second chapter of Acts. Of course, as usual, I find my self wondering about the part that is not recorded. Yes, the disciples were awaiting the coming of the Spirit. Jesus had promised that to them. I can’t help but wonder what they were expecting—what they thought was going to happen. As observant Jews, they had come to Jerusalem for this major festival that took place each year exactly fifty days after Passover. It was a harvest festival and they people brought their first fruits to the Temple.

The disciples, of course, had been through what was likely the most unusual and challenging fifty days in their lives: the horror of the week in Jerusalem that ended with Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion; their initial terror of the empty tomb—where had Jesus’ body gone? Who might have taken it? Confusion, bewilderment, and relief around the post-resurrection appearances and time with Jesus, listening and learning of what was to come for them. Do you suppose with Jesus’ appearances some of them might, on some level, have begun to get a bit comfortable? Believing that this might be the “new normal,” Jesus might be back—in a different way, maybe, but back on a regular basis? Pushing away the reality of his promised ascension? But then, that ascension came. Jesus was gone, leaving them with the promise that they would not be left alone. The Spirit, the Counselor, the Advocate would be sent.

I can’t imagine that they wouldn’t have wondered what that would be like. Nothing, so far, had turned out as they expected or hoped—no overthrow of the Roman occupiers, no prevailing peace and lack of hardship and suffering. Might the Holy Spirit bring all of that now?

But, no. What they got was what one preacher calls "holy boldness"—that enabling power that provided the disciples with the authorization to witness and to carry the message forth. It was a boldness that shattered old barriers and broke down the divisions that separated humanity to

bring them together as one. This was not for the faint of heart. They were to carry forth and spread the Gospel. Heal, teach and preach, often at risk to their own safety. They would not be able to merely hold out their hands and make wars cease, disease and hunger vanish. No more than Jesus did. No more than we can do.

Oh, I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe that the Spirit did pour herself out onto those disciples and continues to do so with us. I believe that the Holy Spirit is real and works in and through our lives. Now, that does not mean that I believe that our lives are all predetermined, that there is some kind of master plan that leaves no room for human choice. The best way I can explain how I understand the Spirit is to say that it is the presence of God right here in our lives—individual *and* as a congregation—that nudges us, that opens doors—or closes them. That offers possibilities that we might never imagine. Some of us are better able to be aware of the workings of the Spirit than others. Those of us who *are* aware sometimes find ourselves in an almost magical place where we feel so attuned to the Spirit that life seems to flow effortlessly. Unfortunately, the realities of human existence don't often allow us to stay in that place forever.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is real, because there have been too many instances where I have seen it. Especially when people have come to a point where they must turn a particular situation or dilemma over to God because they just don't have any answers. Even the most "take charge" types who are accustomed to being able to "get the job done." Those for whom turning things over does not come easily!

But sometimes we fool ourselves—if we just believe the right things, if we just behave in the right ways, everything will be wonderful. Life will be smooth sailing. Happiness will be ours. There are some churches that even preach this!

So, what if it doesn't work out that way? Did we not believe enough? Did we not do all the right things? Where is the Holy Spirit in times like we live in today? In a nation and a world so filled with fear and anger—even hatred and violence. In a community like Galena where there are tragic deaths of honor students just before graduation? Where those we love suffer such pain and grief and despair? Where is this Spirit?

The Spirit is here, friends. It is here now. It was here on Friday and at other times when we have said farewell to loved ones. It is here in our gathering, in our prayers, in our celebrations, and in our tears. We think of ourselves as a "caring congregation." And we are. That caring is in every cup of soup shared with someone who is sick or recovering. That caring is in meals shared at the Rescue Mission, supplies and support for the ARC or South Sudan or SE Mexico. And in so many places and ways.

Do you suppose we became a caring congregation because all of these caring people happened to show up at our doors? Saying, "I need someone to care for. So I think I'll go to Grace Church." Well, I suppose that's possible. It is more likely that the Spirit has been at work in this place. Through our prayers, our interactions, working to connect us in deep ways. Working to shape us and guide us, enable us to risk being hurt or vulnerable when we come to care so much.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit—not the absence of pain and sorrow. We do not sit alone behind our locked doors. We come together and the Holy Spirit is in our midst as the comforting—and

yet urging—presence of God, the gentle—and fierce—presence that guides and inspires, that feeds our souls and brings us peace and joy in the midst of our chaotic lives, our pain and our stress.

Let us find comfort and consolation in the gentle and quiet Spirit that is the presence of God in our lives, the Spirit that feeds us and sustains us. Let us dare, too, to be touched by the tongues of fire, to be filled with "holy boldness" so that we can come alive with the Spirit of God and carry forth God's Word, the fire and wind of transformation that our world needs so desperately. We have been given this gift. May the Spirit move us to go forth and use it! Amen.

*Following the sermon, the preacher lead the congregation in singing "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me."*