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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 24, 2026

Day of Pentecost, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Numbers 11:24-30

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Acts 2:1-21

John 7:37-39

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Here we were seven weeks ago at Easter Day hearing the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb of Jesus. She brought the best she had: spices, devotion, grief. She came to tend a body. But instead she found a living Lord, who met her where she was, but didn't leave her there; who sent her out to share a good news she could never have imagined.

Today is Pentecost: the fiftieth and last day of Easter Season, standing opposite Easter Day like a pair of bookends around this sacred time. Today is the day of the Spirit, the day of the Church. Today Jesus sends his friends out once more, in a different way, on a wider scale.

Two weeks ago at our annual clergy conference our guest speaker, Bishop Rob Wright, talked about “tomb spirituality.” Tomb spirituality is a spirituality of grief; a spirituality that looks backwards. It’s a very human instinct: to honor what we’ve lost by tending its memory. And we need to grieve our losses. Mary was doing a good thing, bringing those spices to the tomb. But it’s possible to get stuck there in ways that keep us from seeing that God has a future for us.

We do this in the church sometimes: remembering glory days gone by, longing for a past we know will not come again, instead of trusting that God is still alive, still touching hearts and transforming lives and inviting us to find new ways to join in. We do it in our society. “Make America Great Again”: surely a backward-looking slogan if we’ve ever heard one, with an implied narrative of nostalgia for glory days now lost. And there are forms of this on the left too: longings for the sixties struggle, or the Clinton or Obama eras. Personally I don’t think any era was a golden age. Rather than wanting us to go backward, I think God is inviting us forward: to live in the times we’re in now, fully and authentically and bravely. To be Pentecost people who have a message of good news and radical love that we’re bursting to share with the world, and who trust that God can do new and better things in our own time and the times to come.

Certainly even after the resurrection the disciples weren't immune from looking backward. Last week we heard how they asked Jesus before his Ascension, "Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They wanted to go back to the golden days of David and Solomon, when Israel was independent under a strong king instead of a province of the Roman Empire. They wanted to make Israel great again. Their vision extended to a throne room in Jerusalem, not a heavenly throne room and a mission to all people everywhere. But today at Pentecost the Spirit sends them not backward but forward, spilling out of their gathering place and into the streets to shout good news to every tribe and language and people.

Pentecost can be messy. And that's nothing new. In our Old Testament reading we heard about how Moses planned to authorize seventy elders to join him in his work. They were properly named and chosen and assembled in the right places. But two of them weren't where they were supposed to be. Eldad and Medad were back in the camp and the Spirit fell on them too. I love the young man, the self-appointed tattletale, who runs to Moses to tell him, and Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, who says "It's time to shut this thing down!" But Moses, God bless him, isn't defensive, isn't preoccupied with protocol. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" From the very beginning the Spirit has been a little unpredictable, a little wild, showing up maybe where we least expect her to show up, and might not be thrilled when she does.

Our reading from John's gospel today has Jesus describing the gift of the Spirit as a river of living water that wells up and flows out of him, and out of each of us in turn. And there's something about a river: it only flows forward. The living water of Jesus isn't a dammed-up pool or a stagnant puddle. It can't be hoarded. It can't flow backward. Life in the Holy Spirit isn't about nostalgia for an imagined golden past. It's an unstoppable current that keeps rolling onward: toward our thirsty neighbors, toward a thirsty world, desperate for news that love is stronger than death.

Now that doesn't mean we don't carry things with us. In fact we need our history, need our stories that make us who we are. When we gather here today we do it to hear these ancient words of scripture; to pray over bread and wine in the way Jesus taught us, saying "Do this in remembrance of me." But we're not here to venerate a dead Jesus but to encounter a living one. We are people of remembrance, but not a remembrance that keeps us captive in nostalgia for a past that is gone; a living memory that reminds us where we have been on our pilgrimage and who has been with us from the beginning and is still with us in our own place and time, on our own adventure.

So we gather this Pentecost carrying all our stories with us, our memories, our griefs, our triumphs, our longings, our losses. And we might well carry some backward longings: for the ways the church used to be, the ways this country used to be, the ways our own lives used to be. The risen Jesus doesn't scold us for those longings. Just like he met Mary, he meets us where we are; calls us by name; and commissions us to join him in a new and living mission. And he fills us with his Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of adventure, a living water that carries us forward into the world he died and rose to redeem.