

Translating Easter: Spanish is not an elective

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

In the essay “Jesus Shaves,” from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris describes a day in a French class that he enrolled in shortly after moving to Paris. In the second month of class, students were learning about the holidays. The textbook listed a series of holidays with accompanying pictures, and the students were told to match the picture with the holiday. A student from Morocco piped up: “Excuse me, but what’s an Easter?”

The other students, within the limits of their infant French, struggled to explain.

“It is,” said one, “a party of the little boy of God who call his self Jesus and . . .”

“He die one day and then he go above of my head to live with your father.”

“He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples.”

“He nice, the Jesus.”

“He make the good things, and on Easter we be sad because somebody make him dead today.”

The students’ meager vocabulary and grammar were no match for the mystery and marvel of “an Easter,” but they were inspired by the textbook’s Easter illustration of a chocolate bell, and continued to work their French:

“Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb . . . One too may eat of the chocolate.”

“The rabbit of Easter. He bring the chocolate.”

As Sedaris reports, all of this didn't clarify anything.

It's challenging to talk about and understand the resurrection even when we all speak the same language. But in more and more communities around this nation, we don't. And the language spoken by the majority of non-English speakers? Spanish. Kudos to the Roman Catholic Church for recognizing this and requiring priests to learn Spanish. But what about the rest of us? I attended a Lutheran seminary where rudimentary Hebrew and Greek were expected of all. I was one of those annoying, overindustrious students who never once complained. I actually enjoyed the challenge. I gained new insight into the Semitic thought world and new appreciation for the nuances of meaning in countless passages. I learned how to do word studies and how retranslating the ancient texts could deepen current meaning.

But I did not learn how to tell Javier about Easter. I did not learn how to listen to José, who had just arrived in New York City from potato farming in the foothills of the Andes, and was afraid and sick. I did not learn how to extend comfort and affection to Juana and Pedro when their father suddenly died and their mother left to attend the body on the uncertain journey back to Mexico. I did not learn how to counsel Griselda and Rigoberto in their marriage crisis. I did not learn how to pray and sing in the language of so many who find their way to this congregation. I did not learn how to prepare the family of five-year-old Marisela for her upcoming Easter baptism. To do those things, however imperfectly, I had to learn Spanish.

The way things stand in many seminaries, learning Hebrew and Greek is the standard for everyone, while learning Spanish is a specialty reserved for the few. In many cases, it is available only off campus and at the student's additional expense. I think we have it backwards. I am no supporter of dumbing down theological education. But after 20 years in the ordained ministry, with apologies to my wonderful biblical studies professors, who gave me tools to undergird a lifelong passion for the Bible, I have to admit that my Hebrew and Greek proficiency has fallen by the wayside while Spanish fluency has grown—and I am the better pastor for it. All the Hebrew and Greek in the world will not help me translate Easter in a community with growing numbers of Spanish-speaking neighbors.

I serve on a seminary board, so I'm aware of the relentless pressures on schools to add more core requirements and training. I know that there is a limit on how much can be accomplished in a given time and that our learning as leaders does not end with an M.Div. degree. But if learning a language other than English is not presented

as the norm, it will never be embraced later on by busy pastors. If there is not time to study the ancient languages as well as Spanish, then Spanish should be our choice. As for those seminaries that have no language requirement whatsoever, I propose that the need to translate Easter demands a shift.

A dear friend went on a trip to South America and fell head-over-heels in love. The only problem, besides the distance, is the language barrier. My friend speaks no Spanish, and the one with whom she is desperate to communicate speaks no English. This is not the insurmountable problem one might assume, thanks to Babel Fish Translation, a Web site that takes text in one language and converts it into another—all at the click of a mouse.

Babel Fish claims to be 70 percent accurate. Of course, the 30 percent inaccuracy creates real frustrations. After courageously declaring her love and opening the first responding e-mail spit out by Babel Fish, she read: “I tell you that strange your presence, also strange your looks, strange to stroll with you the high mountains.” A true translation would read: “I miss your presence, I also miss your glances and I miss walking with you in the high mountains.” Nevertheless, the other 70 percent of the Babel Fish version made it clear that her love is more than requited:

At times I ask, why happens us these things to the human beings, but these alone answers God knows him. I believe that among us has born a new feeling that can do it large in spite of the distance and the difficulties of the language.

I propose to communicate us more continuously to speak of us of all as much as happens, of our lives and to know us more. Your message is full of love and poetry, and I expect to continue reading always the beautiful messages that leave of your heart.

Also I am learning English, because desire to communicate me in the better way; but that imports it languages, if our hearts speak the same language.

Praise God for Babel Fish! I doubt most of us get it 70 percent right on an average Sunday.

I know that my early sermons in Spanish were filled with verbal glitches. My Argentinean husband still reminds me of a time—when my brain’s translation engine

was not yet up to speed and Babel Fish did not exist—when I preached on the parables of Jesus and referred to them, throughout the sermon, as “the balls of Jesus.”

I know from personal experience that the acquisition of a new language is far from easy, but Jesus didn't promise easy. I also know that there are a multitude of other, equally vital demands upon the time and energy of seminarians. And I know that my friend and her new friend are both adults with full-time careers, overwhelmed with work. And yet . . . they are in love. And so, somehow they are making time to learn a new language.

Love makes us do crazy things. Love makes us desperate to communicate. So, one would think, does Easter.