

“Ineffably Sublime”

Luke 24:1-12; Psalm 118: 1-24-24 4-08-07

Most of you know I love music—almost all kinds of music. I must admit, however, that some of the modern stuff that passes as music, but is mostly rhythm, leaves me a little perplexed. I have learned that I am a “by ear” sort of person, certainly not by note. Even Piano for Dummies has not been able to help me smoothly translate musical notes from the page to my brain to my fingers to the keys. But if I hear a few notes I have heard somewhere before, I can almost always “Name That Tune.”

Along with my love of melody goes the love of words. I especially love the combination of words we find in some of our hymns. I don’t quite understand it when others do not share my same sense of joy when we sing things like, “In simple trust like theirs who heard beside the Syrian sea.” The sound is so rich and rewarding. Or other words like, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Or, “Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! Following our exalted head, Alleluia. Made like him like him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!” Those are familiar words that express what is deep within our emotions and allow us to own our feelings while giving voice to hope and faith.

Thus, we come to the title of this Easter meditation, which of course comes from the last verse of the hymn we just sang together.

The first line of the last verse is full of delight for me in music and word and sound and meaning. Who among us could produce: “Crown him the Lord of Years, the potentate of time, Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime?” In fact, it took two “some ones” to create those words. We must imagine that they understood deep within their souls the force those words would have as well as the depth of their meaning on this Easter morn, when once again we strive to understand what it means to us to say “He is risen, he is risen, indeed.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his cell in Nazi Germany wrote to his parents about the strength of hymns, “It’s a year now since I actually heard a hymn. But the music of the inner ear can often surpass what we hear physically. I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns.”

Bonhoeffer must have felt that music can often move us beyond where we are to a place rich with understanding.

For me this day is a time for music and scripture to nudge me to suspend my theological position and logic and allow myself to be “Eastered” as were the women who first came to the tomb and as were the disciples who first judged their story as “an idle tale.” It is a time to move forward in faith, as so many have for so many years. It is a time when words fail us as they did those original followers and we lean on the music of our faith, for it helps us get a little grasp on what it is we cannot fully comprehend.

We do not know exactly what happened so many years ago on that first Easter. The women who went to the tomb were surprised to find Jesus missing. They did not expect

the resurrection even though their Teacher had been telling them about it far in advance of his death.

The disciples were all scattered and hiding when Jesus was executed. In their minds it was over, done with, and they needed to think of their safety first. But something happened to convert them from quivering cowards to people full of strength and drive and determination to keep the message of Christ alive. There was a major transformation. They became convinced that death had not defeated Jesus and they understood that death would not be the end for them. So, they lost their fear and emerged back into life to establish and sustain what is now our faith. As they accepted what it was that had happened it moved beyond earthly definition to something that was “ineffably sublime.” Something that was full of such wonder that they knew it was far beyond their ability to put it in a box to contain it.

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon them, fifty days following Easter, further broadened the hope that this mystery held for them, and for us, and urged them forward and outward carrying the good news of Christ with them. They did this not only through the spoken word, we are told, but through hymns and spiritual songs. They took an event that was “ineffably sublime” or “unspeakably exalted,” and examined it and turned it and tipped it and explored it to find all the meaning they could. Then they shared what it was they could not fully comprehend. And we do the same. We do the same by being here this morning and recognizing the importance of this day for the continuation of our faith.

New discoveries are touted about the Bible around this time of year. Some feel these other gospels should pull us away from what we believe or even destroy the center of our faith. Some feel it is best to turn away from such discoveries. But, we are always seeking the truth and our sense of it must always be growing to keep it fresh and relevant for years to come. I believe that we need to take a look at what is proclaimed as “new.” Most often we discover what is “new” is not really and we remain solid to the core of our belief system. As a good friend of mine says of all such discoveries, “I take the meat and leave the bones.”

The “meat and bones” of our faith differ for each of us, especially as Congregationalists. While, as all Christians, we have our basis for our faith, grounded in the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Christ, we have freedom of interpretation guided by our conscience. New writing and discoveries should only enrich what it is we already believe.

When we gaze into the tombs of our lives and take a look at all of the “what could have beens” we might feel a bit distressed. But, then, when we look into the empty tomb of our Christ, the one who came to give us all hope for a future in which we will journey on and be reunited with God, we understand that all we have of life lies before us. And it will be “ineffably sublime” for all who follow the way the truth and the life of love, patience, understanding and forgiveness. For he has risen, he has risen, indeed. Amen