

No Need for Alarm Mark 16:1-8 4-16-06

There is a little hymn written by Natalie Sleeth we have sung here, at least once, entitled “Hymn of Promise.” The words to this hymn are these:

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There’s a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There’s a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, only God alone can see.

This simple little hymn, which reminds us that we do not have the ability of God to know all things reminded me of a bit of poetry written by T.S. Eliot. The larger work is “Four Quartets” of which the following few words are in part of a section known as “Little Gidding.”

The words penned by Eliot, that seem in my mind, at least, to tie into Natalie Sleeth’s thought process are:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

In reading a bit about Sleeth and the writing of her hymn, I discovered, that she was, indeed, influenced by this piece of poetry.

Here we are, it is Easter of 2006 at the end of the Lenten season. We have come hoping to discover an answer or perhaps **the** answer to the puzzling events that confronted the women at the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morn.

This is a morning on which we celebrate a great mystery—something God alone can see. The gospel of Mark, in its retelling of the resurrection story seems to leave us hanging. One person calls it the “dangling gospel.” It appears to come to a very abrupt and unsatisfying end. And in what is believed to be the original it does. It ends with the 16th chapter, the eighth verse. If you followed along in your pew Bibles, you will have noticed that there are additions to this ending to make it more satisfactory. Whether Mark died before he could complete his Gospel or whether a part of it was accidentally lost is anyone’s guess. There is just more mystery regarding this at this time.

By this point in the Gospel, Jesus had walked through Holy Week. He had shared a last supper with his disciples, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, been betrayed, tried before Pilate and found wanting, been denied, beaten and crucified. To add to all the agony and pain associated with the days and nights his followers had faced, he was gone. He was not there. Before his body could be properly and lovingly prepared for burial something had happened.

He did not appear to the women. There were no grave cloths neatly removed and folded. There was just a messenger who assured the women that Jesus had gone on before them to Galilee and that they needed to go and tell the disciples that they would see him there. The women were badly shaken by his disappearance and they ran away telling no one what they heard or saw.

Mark is the first of the gospels that was written and in its spare form it leaves everyone wondering. Mark opens the door to the mystery while providing no answer to it. He invites us in to explore the story of Jesus and to come to our own conclusions. We are left in the middle of a mystery.

This should not necessarily surprise us. Jesus often went about creating mystery and puzzlement and many questions in his wake. He pointed toward the answer he hoped all those who followed would be able to discover for themselves. The answer that would guide humans to reinforce the covenant they had with God through his life and teachings, death and resurrection. The answer that would encourage us all to learn how to make, renew and keep covenants with one another as well. The answer he kept pointing to throughout his ministry was love. Love not only made the world go round but, through it, forgiveness, understanding, inclusiveness and patience were revealed.

If we process the stories of Jesus and think about them for a while, we should not feel the alarm the women felt when he seemed to be gone. If we understand the message he brought us and still brings us, we will know that there is a promise of life everlasting and that is where he went. We will know, if we have listened and thought a bit that we, too, as practicing Christians will go where he has gone.

Sometimes I know it is a struggle to comprehend this, especially when someone close to us dies and we really do not want to let that person go. But, I believe, that life goes on, on both sides of the grave. It goes on in a way we cannot comprehend as we sit where we are right now. You may ask me those five questions any good reporter would ask, "How, where, when, why and what?" and, perhaps even ask, "To what extent?" And I would have to tell you, in all honesty, "I do not know, it is a mystery." But, while I do not know, I do believe in a God of love and forgiveness who accepts us all no matter who we are or where we are in life. Having this belief should never stop any of us from asking the questions and seeking the answers. If we keep asking, seeking and knocking at doors that appear closed to us, we will, some day, in God's good time find the answers.

Another little portion from Eliot's "Little Gidding" reminds us:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

I do not think this means that all our questions and our exploring will simply lead us around in circles. Instead they will lead us through the mazes of life we encounter and help us begin to make some sense of the mysteries that are all around. One of my favorite hymns "Be Still, My Soul" sings of this when it says: "Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake to guide the future as he has the past. Thy hope thy confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last."

And what more can we hope for on this morning of the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord to eternal life? What more can we hope for? He is risen, he is risen indeed. Amen