

“The End and the Beginning”
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 5/17/26

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, something God alone can see.¹

Composer Natalie Sleeth penned these words in 1986 as the text of an anthem she was writing for church choirs. The piece was inspired by a line from T.S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece *The Waste Land*: “In my end is my beginning,” Eliot wrote. Reflecting on that line, “in my end is my beginning,” Sleeth composed this text, exploring possibilities for renewal, rebirth and resurrection. From nature – “in the seed an apple tree” – to time – “from the past will come the future” – to our very lives with God – “in our doubt, there is believing, in our life, eternity” – in this poem Natalie Sleeth invites us to look for reminders all around us of the truth of the resurrection: that, by God's grace, what seems like the end is often the beginning, the beginning of new life.

Funnily enough, the story of this poem follows that pattern in its own way. Soon after Sleeth completed the anthem, her husband was diagnosed with cancer, which turned out to be terminal. He requested that his wife's reflection on ends as beginnings be sung at his funeral. In the 40 years since his death, the anthem has become a favorite of church choirs – I've sung it dozens of times – and that led Sleeth to turn it into a hymn. “In the bulb there is a flower,” or as she originally titled it, “Hymn of Promise” now appears in the updated Presbyterian Hymnal, published in 2013, for even more people to sing – and in the singing to remember the many mysterious ways God's promise of resurrection is revealed to us. The end of her husband's life was the beginning of the life of these words, words which I and so many others come back to again and again, especially in this Easter season, words that remind us that while grief remains, new life can indeed come from death.

Our story from Acts for today, the ascension of Jesus into heaven – the ascension is unique in the sense that it is perhaps the only story in the Bible told by the same author twice. Luke uses the story of the ascension to close his gospel: after the resurrection, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples, eats with them, provides them with one last teaching about his role as Messiah, and blesses them. Then Luke tells us, at the very end of chapter 24, “while Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” A fitting end to the gospel, the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

But Luke doesn't end his story there. Where his gospel ends, his next book begins: the Acts of the Apostles, telling not the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection but the story of those who followed him, his disciples who became the messengers of his good news. As soon as the page turns to their story, Luke gives them a new moniker: they are no longer disciples, meaning students – they are apostles, meaning ones sent out. And the last story of the gospel of Luke becomes the first story of the acts of these apostles.

In his second telling of the ascension, in Acts chapter 1, Luke gives us a bit more detail. The disciples-turned-apostles ask if now is the time when Jesus will restore the kingdom to Israel – that is, if now is the time when Jesus will assume the throne as an earthly ruler in the style of King David, a ruler who will liberate God's people from the oppressive yoke of Roman imperial authority. “It is not for you to know the timeline,” Jesus responds. But he does promise the apostles that they will receive power – power from the Holy Spirit that will enable them to witness to the love of God revealed through Jesus's resurrection, power that will enable them to share God's love first in the city of Jerusalem, then throughout the region where God's chosen people dwell, and eventually to the ends of the earth. When he has said these things, Jesus is lifted up, carried by a cloud into heaven. The apostles are left agape, with their eyes on the sky.

In the version of the story from Luke's gospel, the ascension is the end – the end of Jesus's earthly ministry. In the version of the story from Acts, the ascension is the beginning – the beginning of the spread of the gospel. According to Luke's account, the spread of the gospel will happen just as Jesus told the apostles: first the apostles themselves will preach in Jerusalem, then the gospel will be carried out to the surrounding regions, and by the end of the book of Acts, Paul will have taken the good news all the way to the seat of imperial power, to the city of Rome itself. And past Luke's telling, the gospel has come all the way down through the ages, to times and places unimagined by those first apostles and their chronicler Luke – the gospel has come even to us, in our time, in our place. Indeed Jesus's ascension into heaven was not the end of the story – it was the beginning of a new story, a story which is still being written, a story which includes us.

Earlier this week our session had the pleasure of hearing the faith statements of 13 of our youth. Our 7th, 8th and 9th graders spent the year faithfully engaged in the confirmation process, a process that had them meeting almost weekly throughout the school year to consider what they believe. We covered as much of the big stuff in class as we could manage: questions like, why do bad things happen if God is good? What exactly is the Bible? Who was Jesus and how do we follow him? What does it mean to be Presbyterian? How should Christians relate to people of other faiths? At the end of the confirmation process we ask the students to write a statement of faith, synthesizing what they've learned and considering their own answers to these questions. On Tuesday they presented their statements to our governing body, the session, and by doing so affirmed that they want to become adult members of our church community.

In the small group of students and elders that I got to be a part of, one of the youth said in his faith statement that he realized that going through confirmation and taking time to write out what he believed was not the end of his faith journey, but rather a new beginning – the spark of a new interest in the faith that he's been brought up in. He expects that his faith will continue to grow and change as he continues to grow and change. I have no poker face, so if he had looked my way as he was saying that I'm sure he would have seen some sign of the internal happy dance that I was doing.

Because that's exactly what we hope our students will get out of confirmation – the sense that though confirmation class comes to an end, their journey of faith is only just beginning. We hope that you will continue to ask questions, continue to express doubts and continue to seek clarity in the community of the church. We hope that you will continue to learn and grow and stretch, challenging yourselves and challenging all of us by your unique witness to be more faithful to God. And we hope that you will become lifelong followers of Jesus, sharing the good news of God's amazing love with your words and with your actions. The journey of confirmation has come to an end, but we hope and pray that this end is actually a new beginning – a new beginning in the journey of your life with God.

All of us, no matter our age – all of us are on this journey as well. Whether we are four or eighty-four, there is still more to discover about our awesome God, still more to discover about the world our God created and the people our God gave us to be our neighbors; there are still more ways to live our calling to be God's faithful people. We are all still learning and growing, we are all still questioning and considering, we are all still challenging and being challenged. The Jesus who ascended into heaven is not yet finished with his story – or with us. Maybe the rest of us want to take a leaf out of the confirmands' book and sit down with ourselves to think about where we are now. What do we believe, how have we grown, what do we still hope to learn?

And how has God been gracious to us through things that felt like the end – things that felt like that end but by God's grace actually turned out to be a new beginning? A divorce, an illness, the loss of a job; the end of a school year, the end of a season of life; the end of a relationship, even death itself – by God's resurrection power at work in the world, at work in us, our endings can be new beginnings. Jesus's death leads to the new life of his resurrection; the end of Jesus's earthly ministry through his ascension into heaven leads to the new life of the church universal, no longer bound to one place and time but reaching globally, reaching across the ages. We too are caught up in the story – our endings may also become our beginnings.

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, something God alone – something yet unknown – something God alone can see.