

Sunday Sermon
August 20, 2017
“In the End Is Our Beginning”
I Corinthians 15:35-44

Introduction:

In her classic essay “Total Eclipse,” writer Annie Dillard describes her personal experience of a solar eclipse in Washington State. As you read the narrative you feel like you are observing someone or something dying. “The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. Abruptly it was dark night, on the land and in the sky. In the night sky was a tiny ring of light. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world. We were the world’s dead people rotating and orbiting in the dark. (1) She is right. When the light goes out in our lives, we feel like the world’s dead people.

This summer we have looked at the Apostle’s Creed. What do we claim we believe when we say those words? The Creed begins with creation, God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. It ends with a promise for creation, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” When the light goes out, we are not merely dead people.

I.

A couple of winters ago, I found myself burned out from conducting twenty-one funerals in thirteen months. That may not be a lot for some pastors, but we are Presbyterians, for goodness sakes; there are not that many of us to begin with.

So late in that February on an icy, bitter cold night, I went online and I found a deluxe giant butterfly kit that came with two cups of caterpillars, guaranteed to make ten painted butterflies in four to five weeks. I did not know a thing about growing caterpillars into butterflies. But I wanted something, some sign of birth and life. So I clicked that button, and I ordered those worms. This is what happens when you get snowed in with a computer.

I wanted something that said when the light goes out, we are not merely dead people. It was Harriet McBryde Johnson, an attorney and disability rights activist, who toward the end of a life disabled and shortened by a neuromuscular disease, wrote, “Thank God, life outlives death.”

So the caterpillars arrived, quicker than the web site said they would. And they started eating and growing and changing from caterpillars to chrysalides, quicker than the instructions said they would. These were over-achieving caterpillars. “Slow down,” I said to my husband, “What am I going to do? They are moving too fast for my Easter Sunday schedule.”

The next week I had to go out of town, so I took the jar with the cocoons hanging from the lip to Anneliese. Anneliese was the widow of Fred, one of those twenty-one funerals. “Can you watch this?” I asked. “If the butterflies start hatching, they are going to need some sugar water.”

Indeed, on the first day of spring, God’s timing, the first chrysalides started to break apart with butterflies emerging. I was not there to see it, but Anneliese was. Throughout the day she made calls, updating the count, “Two more . . . three more . . . We’re up to eight now.”

When I got back in town and picked up the butterflies, I checked the instructions. “You should not keep the butterflies more than a week,” the sheet said. So a week and a half before Easter Sunday, the children and I let the butterflies go in the prayer labyrinth.

We opened the container, and they flew away; that is, all except two. Those two just sat there, as if saying thank you, but I would just as soon not go. There are scary things out there I do not want to face, like birds who want to eat me. Please do not make me go. So we put those two back in the container for a few more days.

Whether we are ready or not, whether we want to go or not, we are on this journey through this mortal world. And it does come to an end for these bodies. We may not be able to read it, but our body comes with an expiration date.

It was St. Augustine who said, “It is as when a physician leans over a sick man's bed and declares, ‘He is dying; he won't get over this,’ so on the first day of our life, one could look into our cradle and say, ‘He is dying; he won't get over this.’” But as Johnson said, **“Thank God, life outlives death.”**

II.

So what does the Creed mean when it says, “the resurrection of the body”? Does that mean literally our physical bodies? It does not. We change molecules several times in our bodies over the course of our lives. These are not the bodies we were born with, and these are not the bodies in which we will spend eternity.

What we plant in the soil and what grows out of the soil do not look anything alike, the apostle Paul says. You could never guess what a flower would look like by looking at its bulb. Likewise, the body or ashes we bury and the resurrection body that comes from it will be dramatically different. What goes down in physical mortality, he says, will be raised up in spiritual immortality. (2)

After watching the total eclipse, Annie Dillard and her husband drove to a restaurant in a nearby town. The place was filled with other eclipse-watchers, all talking about their amazing experiences. “Did you see? Did you see how dark it got?” And then came a young college student, “Did you see,” he asked, “that little white ring? It looked like a Life Saver, a Life Saver up in the sky.” (3)

When in this world, the light seems to be eclipsed and we are shrouded in darkness, it is not all over. There is the promise of resurrection and life everlasting through Christ. He is the corona, you could say, the life saver ring of light that shines against all that would block it. Christ keeps moving on the back side through the darkness. The light is still there, and it will shine again. Because **“Thank God, life outlives death.”**

Conclusion.

So we come to the end of the Apostle’s Creed. It ends with a single word: Amen. And we realize the Creed is as much a prayer as it is a statement of faith.

To say “Amen” is to say, “May it be so.” May what be so? Everything that this confession teaches us about our faith and believing. May it be so in your life and mine. May it be so for all believers in every time and place.

In her final years, my mother struggled with Parkinson’s dementia. One year at Christmas, the family gathered with her: the children, the grandchildren, and the great grandchildren. The meal was on the table, and the presents were under the tree ready for exchanging.

I turned to Mom, and asked, “Would you like to say the prayer?” She began to pray from her grateful, humble spirit. But then she got a little confused and started repeating the same things over and over.

The great grandchildren started to get restless. Their parents, the grandchildren, and their grandparents, my siblings, started to give me looks that said, “Do something.”

So when Mom started her litany of thanksgiving for about the fourth round, I said loudly, “Amen.” But Mom kept going, “I thank you for your love and how from you we have learned to love each other.” “Amen,” my husband said. She kept going, “I thank you for the gift of your Son, and how he taught us about you and your kingdom.” “Amen,” my brother said. She kept going. My sister tried it; then her husband tried. Mom kept going.

And then, something happened. We all started saying “Amen” after each confession of faith. It became a litany of Amens.

And then we started to sing it [Organist plays: “Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen. Amen.”]

When we come to the point of saying what we believe as a prayer, we move from simply reciting to living this confession of faith, and it becomes a confession that can carry us through to the end. And the end becomes the beginning. Because **“Thank God, life outlives death.”**

“I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.”

Notes:

1. Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse,"
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/08/annie-dillards-total-eclipse/536148/>.
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, I Corinthians 15:35-44.
3. Dillard, "Total Eclipse."