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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, June 14, 2015

“Growing a New Creation”

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Mark 4:26-34

There is a story attributed to the Hungarian writer Útmutató a Léleknek about two babies talking to one another in the womb and speculating on their world. He writes:

One asked the other: “Do you believe in life after delivery?” The other replied, “Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later.”

“Nonsense,” said the first. “There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?”

The second said, “I don’t know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can’t understand now.”

The first replied, “That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is logically impossible.”

The second insisted, “Well I think there is something and maybe it’s different than it is here. Maybe we won’t need this physical cord anymore.”

The first replied, “Nonsense. And moreover, if there is life, then why has no one has ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere.”

[http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael_prescotts_blog/2015/02/life-after-birth-.html]

It’s an interesting thought experiment, because it points out how we can get so caught up in the world as we know it *now*, or perhaps the world as it *used to be*, that it seems impossible to imagine something new. The world as we know it, if we are comfortable, becomes the world as it is *supposed* to be, and anything different just feels wrong. We know how the world works, and it seems absurd to imagine anything very different. If the world we know is more or less comfortable for us, we have trouble imagining why on earth anyone would want things to change!

And so we can sometimes have trouble with the images in Paul's letters or in the gospels that imagine a "new creation," or a rebirth, or a kingdom of God which is so unlike any other kingdom. We turn these longings into metaphors, or we put it off into some heavenly realm, which will maybe come to pass after we die or in some far-off future that we can't imagine ever really being true.

Paul writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" and all we can think is, "But I liked the old stuff! Why is this good news?" Why would I *want* to be reborn?

I've sometimes wondered whether caterpillars know what's going to happen when they build the chrysalis around themselves, to emerge eventually almost unrecognizable – a butterfly. I wonder, when they're walking around on all those little legs, whether they even dream that one day they will fly. Maybe it's a good thing that they don't have consciousness in the way we understand it, because I bet that would be terrifying.

Can you imagine that? If in the last stages of human development, we started to grow tiny wings just under the surface, and then we entered into what feels like death, shed our old skins and burst out with brand new butterfly wings that make our feet kind of an afterthought, and carry us off into the sky on a whole new adventure?

That would be scary, no question about it, like death is scary no matter what you believe is on the other side of it. And yet if we could see that whole picture, what's on the other side of that tomb-like chrysalis, there's no way we could argue that growing wings and setting off into a whole new world is a bad thing. If we knew that there was a whole other level of existence waiting for us, I wonder if we would start to feel cramped here in these bodies which can only walk along at ground level.

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Our growth as people of faith is not nearly so dramatic or obvious. But it is no less real and no less significant than a young child learning to crawl and then walk on feet for the first time, or than a butterfly drying out its brand new fragile wings and then learning to fly. We learn new ways of being in the world.

The astounding promise of Jesus that the kingdom of God is at hand is at heart a claim that there *is* a whole new level of existence for us, and it is available here and now, in these same bodies. We don't transform physically when we live for the kingdom of God, but we do see an evolution in our hearts and minds.

Following the commandments to love God and love one another means seeing the world through new eyes: seeing all people through the lens of care, of friendship, of forgiveness; seeing our earth as God's precious creation; seeing the way things *ought to be* flickering just behind the reality of pain and prejudice and greed and then helping each other to live into God's ways.

This is the new creation Paul speaks of. We can be new people in the ways of God in Christ, and our old selves will pass away like the caterpillar growing wings, as we are invited into the newness of God's grace.

The kingdom of God springs up like a tree from a mustard seed. What looks like nothing will grow, quickly and unexpectedly, into something wild and beautiful and new. Now there was nothing wrong with the seed itself, before it grew – it was fragrant and good for food! But it can also be so much more than that. Under the right conditions it can also be “the greatest of all shrubs,” which creates shade and homes for birds and even more seeds.

And we like this wildly growing kingdom are invited to be something more. We are offered in Christ, over and over again, the chance to grow into a better person; a more loving person, a braver person, a more faithful person, a happier person.

Every Sunday as we gather together, we confess our own sins and the sins of our world. And every week we are invited to let those things go – to put the old ways aside and take up something new.

By the grace of God, friends, we are invited to let the old things pass away and become a new creation in Christ. So let us stretch our wings and fly!