

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “The End of the Story” (Revelation 21:1-6)

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When my kids were younger I used to love reading to them before rocking them to sleep. Often they would want to read the same books over and over, even if they knew how the story would end. *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Goodnight Moon*, *The Rainbow Fish*—it didn't matter that we had read them many times and knew how they ended, they wanted it read to them again. This wasn't the case with some of the other books I read to them, like *Crime and Punishment* and *Bleak House* —for some reason they weren't as interested in rereading those ☺.

In today's beautiful passage from Revelation we get a glimpse of the end of the greatest story of all, the story of God's great work of creation and redemption through Jesus Christ. This central character in this story is Jesus Christ and this story involves all of human history and everyone who has ever lived, including you and me. The Apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos and given visions from the Holy Spirit about heaven, the Second Coming of Christ, and the final consummation of the Kingdom of God. John recorded these visions into what became known as the Book of Revelation. Today's passage includes a vision of a new heaven and new earth in which God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes and in which death will be no more.

In the new heaven and earth God Almighty will wipe every tear from our eyes. Wiping tears from someone's eyes is a tender and compassionate expression of care and concern, and the fact that God himself tells us that he will one day wipe every tear from our eyes reminds us that he is a tender and compassionate God.

This gives us hope because there are things in our lives that make us cry. Think of a time in your life when you cried. Perhaps it was when you were very young. Perhaps it was when you were not so young. Perhaps it was yesterday. Was there someone there to wipe the tears from your eyes? Was there someone there to comfort and reassure you? If there was, you know how comforting that was, you know how much that meant to you. If not, you know how much that compounded the hurt even more.

I always keep a box of tissues in my office, and often when people come to talk to me they need a tissue, because at some point in our conversation the tears start flowing—not because I have that effect on people (at least I hope I don't), but because people hurt. There are many hurting people out there. There are hurting people in here, right now. Maybe you're one of them. Some people keep their hurt buried deep down inside, while for others it is barely below the surface. Paul and I are in the midst of wedding season here at Christ Church, which means we spend a lot of time having premarital discussions with couples. One of the things I always ask couples to do is describe their family background, what their parents' marriage and home life was like when they were kids, because that will inevitably impact how they view the marriage they're about to

begin. Sometimes people can't even start talking about it; they just start crying, embarrassed, apologizing as they quickly wipe their eyes.

At other times all I have to do is ask someone how what happened made them feel, or make a simple comment like, "That must have really hurt you" or "I'm so sorry that happened to you" and the tears start flowing. Even though it may be uncomfortable when people cry in my office, it's a good thing because it means they are really dealing with the hurt in their lives, that they're open to receiving the grace and healing that only God can give. The church is to be a place where it's safe to cry. That's why Paul exhorted the Christians in Rome to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

And yet there are many hurts that people won't talk about to anyone anytime, not in my office, not in anyone's office. There are some hurts that only God knows about, secret scars that some people take all the way to the grave. The good news is that when it's all said and done, God himself, the Creator and Redeemer of the universe, will personally wipe away the tears from your eyes, even if no one on earth ever does.

Sometimes people cry because life has not gone the way they thought it would go, and the cumulative effect of dashed hopes, broken promises, and shattered hearts becomes overwhelming. Several years ago Anna Nalick had a hit song called *Breathe (2AM)* in which she sings, "Life's like an hour glass glued to the table... no one can find the rewind button"—a compelling image. But what if you could find the rewind button for your life? What would be different?

Maybe you would be wanted by your parents, the cutest baby in the nursery, the most adorable kid in your pre-school class. Maybe school would be a breeze—straight A's, school class president, star athlete, first chair in the school orchestra, lead role in the school play, every teacher's favorite student, every classmate's best friend, invited to every party. Maybe you would not only be accepted into whatever college you wanted, but offered a full ride as well.

Maybe you would marry someone who is better looking than the best Hollywood has to offer with the most charming personality imaginable, someone who never ever annoys you. Maybe you would not only be able to have kids, but as many as you wanted, all healthy—no physical problems, no learning disabilities, no social disorders, no addictions. Maybe you would always live in your dream house (paid for with cash of course), eat whatever and as much as you wanted and still wear the same size clothes as you did in high school. Maybe you would go through your whole life with no hunger, no heartbreaks, no one two-facing or backstabbing you, no one resenting you. Maybe all your kids and grandkids would be perfect just like you, and marry people even more perfect and lead lives that would enable you to win every "parent poker" conversation you ever had. Maybe you could count on dying a clean, painless, quick death only when you felt ready, after all the loose-ends in your life have been tied up, when you are surrounded by loved ones.

But of course life doesn't go that way. We live in a world where kids are often unwanted, tolerated but not cherished, sometimes even neglected or abused, sometimes not even given the chance to be born in the first place. We live in a world in which adolescence can be so stressful that kids develop eating disorders, become addicts, or simply withdraw from reality. We live in a world where boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands and wives are used and then dropped like bad habits. We live in a world in which we use the word "competition" to refer to self-centered narcissistic behavior in which other people are simply rungs on our ladder to success or cogs in the machine to make our lives a little more convenient. We live in a world in which life often does *not* go the way we think it should. We live in a world in which, as REM sings, "Everybody hurts."

We want a rewind button for our lives. Another way to put it is we want a drink from the fountain of youth. I've been reading a collection of short stories by Flannery O'Connor, one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. In her short story, *A Stroke of Good Fortune*, she describes the experience of Ruby Hill, a thirty-four year old single woman who feels stuck and discontent in her life. She often walks eight blocks to and from a grocery store and then has to ascend four flights of stairs back to her apartment, and lives what she considers a monotonous existence. During her trips to and from the store she encounters Mr. Jerger, a 78-year-old who unlike Ruby, is quite happy. During one of Ruby's conversations with Mr. Jerger he asks her a question: "Do you know who Ponce de Leon was?"

"He was the founder of Florida," Ruby said brightly.

"He was a Spaniard," Mr. Jerger said. "Do you know what he was looking for?"

"Florida," Ruby said.

"Ponce de Leon was looking for the fountain of youth," Mr. Jerger said, closing his eyes.

"Oh," Ruby muttered.

"A certain spring," Mr. Jerger went on, "whose water gave perpetual youth to those who drank it. In other words," he said, "he was trying to be young always."

"Did he find it?" Ruby asked.

Mr. Jerger paused with his eyes still closed. After a minute he said, "Do you think he found it? Do you think he found it? Do you think no one else would have got to it if he had found it? Do you think there would be one person on earth who hadn't drunk from it?"

“I hadn’t thought,” Ruby said.

“Nobody thinks anymore,” Mr. Jerger complained.

“I got to be going.” (Ruby said).

Even though there is no rewind button, no fountain of youth, today’s passage reminds us that one day in heaven God will wipe away every tear from our eyes— and that can give us hope and encouragement, especially when we hurt. Not only will God wipe every tear from our eyes, today’s passage shows us that one day “Death will be no more.” Think about that for a minute—no more death.

When I was eleven I started mowing lawns in neighborhood to make money. After mowing the lawn of my first customer, one of our next door neighbors, I was paid \$6—a crisp one and a wrinkled five. I was so excited, and I knew I what wanted to do with that \$6—go to the local pet store and buy a lizard, so I did. I bought a little chameleon and named him Fred. I put him in an empty fish tank we had, with some rocks, grass and leaves. Each day I fed him a live cricket, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching him catch the cricket and then eat it by ramming repeatedly into the side of the tank in order to force the cricket down its throat. Life was good. I took Fred to school once for show and tell. My friends thought Fred was the coolest, especially when he escaped my hands and ran amok around the classroom. My teacher did not think Fred was the coolest, but it made for an interesting day at school. One day I came home from school, ready to feed Fred his daily cricket, but Fred wasn’t moving. His little neck was no longer pulsating from the beat of his heart. Fred was dead. I put him in a small box, made a little cross out of popsicle sticks, and buried him in our backyard. It was one of my first encounters with death.

Since then of course, like all of you, I have had too many encounters with death, deaths of loved ones, relatives, friends—deaths of people at various stages of life from newborn to teenager to “prime of life” to elderly. I did a funeral once for a 16 year-old kid who died in a car accident on the way home from football practice. His casket was closed, his body too damaged for a viewing. His football jersey was draped over the casket. His family, friends, and teammates stumbled through the service, trying unsuccessfully to choke back their tears.

Death is awful. There’s no sugar-coating it. The bad news is that death comes to us all, as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews: “it is appointed for mortals to die” (Hebrews 9:27). None of us knows when our appointment with death will be. It may be on a Sunday morning in May or a Friday night in October. But regardless of when our appointment with death is, the good news is that death is not the end of the story. The good news is that one day in the new heaven and new earth God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and “death will be no more.”

This is because the One on the throne in today’s passage from Revelation is none other than Jesus Christ, our Creator and Redeemer. In his life Jesus knew what it felt like to hurt, to cry.

Jesus may have even wanted to find the rewind button. This Jesus is the Son of God, and he died on the cross to atone for all the sins of the world, for all the things we have done that made others cry and all the things others have done to make us cry. His death atoned for all of it, every bit of it. And his resurrection assures us that we have the hope of eternal life, that one day death will be no more, that our appointment with death will be temporary, not final. This hope gives us encouragement and comfort even as we continue to live in a world in which we cry, in a world in which death is present.

In C. S. Lewis' classic series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is a Christ-like character named Aslan. Aslan is a mighty lion. As the conclusion of the seventh and final book in the series, *The Last Battle*, Lewis describes an encounter that three siblings—Peter, Edmund and Lucy—have with Aslan in heaven. Peter, Edmund, and Lucy, along with their parents, had died in an accident on earth, but they were confused about what had actually happened and where they now found themselves. Lewis writes:

“There was a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are ... dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is morning.”

And as (Aslan) spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Jesus' death and resurrection gives us the hope of eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth where God will wipe every tear from our eyes, where death will be no more. That is the “real story,” a story we can hear again and again.

Amen.