

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

April 12, 2020, Easter Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 (CEV), John 20:1-18

THE EASTER PHENOLOGY REPORT

I don't know if you are like me, but I always feel like spring has begun when the first robin returns. I find myself watching for them as the weather warms up and I always feel such joy when I see the first one.

I'm reminded of the robins who built nests in our camellia bushes year after year, when I was growing up.

I'm also reminded of the one-legged robin who came back to our yard for three years starting when I was about 8 years old. We'd watch for him in the spring and be so amazed that he had returned to us.

This year when I saw my first robin in my front yard, I was reminded of something that was a part of spring when I lived in Northern Minnesota. Our National Public Radio station in Grand Rapids was the first rural NPR station in the nation, and it had some pretty creative programming related to the Northwoods of Minnesota, including the Phenology Report.

Now I don't know about you, but "phenology" was not a word I had ever heard before. What I learned is that phenology is basically the study of when things happen in the natural world and how they are interconnected: When the first robin appears, when the first black bears come out of their dens, when the leaves turn in the fall, when the first snow falls, when the ice on the lake is thick enough to drive on! At least those were things reported on in Northern Minnesota.

Here in Illinois I'm sure our phenology reports include when the first eagles arrive at the Lock and Dams and when the first pelicans are sighted.

While I was thinking about those phenology reports in Minnesota, I was also thinking about this Easter's sermon. What I'd like to suggest we do this morning is look at the phenology report of that first Holy Week and Easter morning.

In that first Holy Week we see firsts that had never been seen before, and have never been seen since in the same way.

In that first Holy Week we see the mystery of our God,
who created the universe and filled this earth with the beauty and power of creation,
who chose to come and live on this earth with us in the person of Jesus,
who chose to confront the powers of evil and brokenness in the world,
who chose to heal the wounded and hurting,
who chose to feed the hungry and lost,
who chose to show us the face of true love,
choosing to walk the way of the cross and death.

In that first Maundy Thursday we see Jesus washing his disciple's feet to show us what servanthood looks like.

We see him take the wine and the bread of the Passover meal and give it a new meaning, saying to his disciples then, and to us each time we gather at the Table, "this is my body, broken for you, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

And on that first Good Friday we see Jesus walking to the Garden of Gethsemane, even though he knew what would happen there.

Knowing what it would cost him,
Jesus allowed Judas to betray him,
and Peter to deny him,
and his own disciples to run away in fear,

And when those who were closest to him could not stay with him,
Jesus chose to be captured,
to be tried by the governor
and the Jewish authorities,
and the crowds who chanted for his crucifixion.

Jesus allowed himself to be beaten and tortured,
he chose to carry his own cross to the hill called Golgatha, and to be crucified there,
and to die a criminal's death
for you, and for me, and for the world.

The phenology report of Easter is the story of our God loving us so much
that our God paid the ultimate price of his very life,
so that we would have the forgiveness of our sins for all time
and the promise of new life.

In the phenology report of that first Easter we see the unbelievable mystery of Jesus
who died on the cross,
who spent three days dead in the tomb,
who actually came back to life on that first Easter morning,
conquering sin and death for all time,
and offering each of us new life in him.

In Jesus we hear a phenology report like none ever known before in human history:
That a man could die on the cross,
and three days later be raised to new life,
with the marks of the nails still in his hands and feet.
And that man was Jesus, the Son of God, our Messiah and Savior.

Our Easter phenology report is the miraculous story of Jesus' love that changed the world. But Mary Magdalene didn't know that when she came to the tomb that first Easter morning. All she knew was that the teacher and healer, she and the disciples had been following, was dead; and life would never be the same again. They had thought he was the promised Messiah, they thought he was the Son of God, but he was dead.

So, she came early in the morning to the tomb, maybe to grieve, to be alone with the pain of his death. And in the despair of her grief, when she found the tomb empty she thought the worst had happened. One of Jesus' enemies had stolen his body from the tomb, as if it wasn't enough that he had been tortured and crucified and died on the cross.

So, she ran to get Peter and John and they came and looked too, and found the tomb empty. When the two men returned to the others,
Mary decided to stay behind.

So it was Mary who was weeping at the tomb
and saw the miracle of the two angels inside the empty tomb,
and then the even greater miracle of the risen Jesus.

But as many of us know, grief can cloud our vision and so she thought Jesus was the gardener. When he said to her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" she said to him: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take his body away."

And it was then, in the midst of her grief and despair that Jesus called her by name: "Mary." And when he named her, she knew who he was and turned to Jesus and said "Teacher."

And he told her the good news that he would go before them to Galilee and meet them all there. And she was to go and tell the disciples this amazing news.

And so Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord."

In that sentence "I have seen the Lord," we have the promise of the Easter phenology report: we too will see the risen Lord.

In the pattern of Jesus coming to Mary on that first Easter, I believe we see the pattern and promise for our own lives.

In our own lives:

in the places where we have known deaths and sorrow,
in the places where the world pandemic has touched our lives in significant, and
sometimes catastrophic ways,
in the places we have been betrayed, or been the betrayers,
in the places where fear seems all-powerful,
in the places where it seems that sin and evil have been victorious,
in the places where we have gone looking for Jesus and don't think we can find him,
in whatever it is in our lives that leaves us lost and weeping,
this first phenology report tells us the pattern of Jesus' love:

Jesus will come to us in our weeping,
Jesus will come to us when we are lost,
Jesus will come to us when we are afraid, and Covid19 is changing the world as we know it,
Jesus will come to us when we think we can't find him,
And he will call *us* by name
and in that naming we will know him,
and Jesus will bring to us the healing
and the good news of the empty cross and the empty tomb.

The promise of Easter Morning is for us all
that never again in the history of the world,
never again, in each of our histories,
will we be alone.

Even in isolation and social distancing, even in quarantine, even as loved ones die, even as the world death-tolls mount, even in the midst of our individual lists of what seems insurmountable, we are not alone, because nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus, our Savior has walked before us into the valleys of sin and death and despair,
Jesus has walked before us into the shadowed places of life,
Jesus has walked down into the abyss,
and Jesus walked out of the abyss, out of the valleys of sin and death,
and has risen victorious,
so that sin and death and despair will never again have the last word.

This is a phenology report like no other!
And now the path of Mary Magdalene, is the pattern set for us:

Let us go out into this Easter day, and the day after, and the day after that,
and tell the Good News, with our words and with our lives:

We have seen the Risen Lord,
And because of Jesus, the world, especially this Covid19 world,
will never be the same again!

Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen!