

“Rising, Blooming, Soaring. . .”
John 20:1-18 (Jesus’ Resurrection)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
April 24, 2011

[Image of sap rising is on screen.]

Conditions need to be exactly right for sap to rise.

“Music in the trees,” that’s what some call the flowing of sap in Maple trees. It’s still a mystery to scientists. One thing they *do* know is that sap flow is entirely temperature dependent. Maple trees pull sap up into their trunks as the temperature freezes, then, [image maple/buckets] when the weather turns warm enough for the trees to begin to thaw, sap flows down the trees via gravity. If the sap is being farmed, it flows out the tap hole. Some years the sap flows for just a few hours; sometimes it flows for days....

Conditions need to be exactly right for sap to rise. Conditions need to be exactly right for [image of blooming flower] plants to bloom.

Many in Southern California await news each spring regarding the desert wildflowers. Are the [image of desert orange blooming] deserts blooming? We hope that the amount and timing of rain and temperature have been just right for much of the desert to bloom with intense color.

Conditions need to be exactly right for plants to bloom. Conditions need to be exactly right for [image butterfly soaring] butterflies to soar.

Butterflies can only soar if their body temperature is warm enough. When it is a little cool, butterflies need to sun themselves to warm up. Once they are warm enough, they take off and are very good fliers. Some fly as fast as 30 mph!

Conditions need to be exactly right for butterflies to fly.

Today we celebrate the fact that *conditions were just right for the Life and Love [image of joyous Jesus/Christ] and message of Jesus Christ to rise up and announce to the world the triumph of life over death, of love over fear and mistrust, of hope over despair, of the community of faith over disparity and conflict. Conditions were just right for the One God brought to the world to convey God’s compassionate power and indomitable love.*

You and I know that sometimes sap, plants, and butterflies *lag behind human schedules*. They are slow to do what we expect or want from them. Maple syrup farmers, nature lovers, and butterfly observers hold our breaths... watching and waiting. For centuries, people had held their breath, watching and waiting for **One who would bridge the gap between Divine Purpose and human longing.**

While sometimes conditions are exactly right, sometimes it seems something has gone wrong with the process.

A United Methodist clergywoman described how one day her three-year-old grandchild came running to her screaming, “...Come and see what’s happening to my tree. Can you fix it?” [Image of colorful tree in fall] It was September, and the girl’s beautiful tree was losing some of its leaves. The grandmother explained “that it was the nature of the tree to change with the seasons, and that all of this was God’s doing.”

The two of them watched the tree carefully as the seasons progressed. Everything went according to the grandmother's prediction until [image few leaves left on tree.] "spring came, and there were still a few dead leaves clinging to the limbs." The girl and her grandmother looked at those stubborn leaves that clung to the tree and they felt like throwing a shoe at them to knock the leaves down, but they decided to wait.

Several weeks later they were admiring new buds [image of budding tree] when they noticed those few dead leaves were gone at last. The clergywoman said, "It was clear that death had given way to new life. The *sap had risen* and pushed the dead leaves off in order that new life could come forth."ⁱ

Although this spring there was a nice, if not dramatic blooming in our nearby deserts, sometimes several years in a row pass without much obvious desert blooming at all. When that happens, it is **not** the case that "things have gone wrong." It is just that the amount and timing of the rain has not been exactly suited to blooming.

It is not our preference, that "something go wrong" with OUR timing.

Yet, *sometimes things seem to go wrong.*

Mary Magdalene thought something had gone wrong. She got to the tomb where Jesus had just been laid the day before. The stone was rolled away from the tomb [image of tomb with stone rolled away]; and Jesus' body was not there. Mary Magdalene interpreted what had happened to be that *something had gone wrong*; someone had stolen the body of Jesus. The Gospel of John is the only Gospel that pictures Mary as weeping. The angel asks her why she is weeping. She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him..." Mary's response is very logical. It fit the circumstances.

John is a great writer! We, the readers, know what Mary does not: that the person she sees **is** Jesus. We are in suspense as we listen to this passage. When and how will she recognize him? Then Jesus himself says, "Who are you looking for?"

That was the question that led Mary to recognize him and respond—"Rabbouni!" (A greeting that means "Dear Teacher") "Who are you looking for?" That was the very question Jesus had asked many people when he was preaching--"Who are you looking for?" knowing they were looking for the One who bridged Divine Purpose with human longing.

That morning at the tomb, Jesus asked Mary the question again, and she recognized his voice. He had promised a transformation from weeping to joy. Now that had been accomplished.

Mary did not hang onto him. However, Jesus anticipated the possibility of her desire to do that. He tells her "Do not hold on to me..." *In other words, do not stop the process. All will be well.*

The little girl and the grandmother saw that all was well with the tree when the buds came, and finally the last few leaves fell off. *The process was what it needed to be.*

When maple sap does not flow abundantly in a particular year, when the desert goes through springtime with very few blooms, when butterflies remain in their cocoons when we think it's time for them to soar. .. **think about it—nothing is dead.** Butterflies are not dead; they are just not yet soaring. Maple trees do not die when their juice is not abundant; their sap has just not flowed in a manner to suit our pancake needs. The seeds in the desert are still there, and the plants that normally bloom are very much alive even when they are not blooming.

When things do not happen as and when we want them to, God’s Transforming power has not died. When we are lonely, grieving, confused or unhappy, the power of transformation that Jesus’ resurrection points to is not dead. When people are dying in war, immigrants all over the world are seeking refuge, hungry persons are praying for food, and all sorts of people are imprisoned by fear—and all these things are indeed happening on this beautiful day, even in Southern California—the Power of Transformation that Jesus’ resurrection points to is not dead.

*If conditions are not exactly right, in our own lives and in the world events, that does not mean that the Blooming Power of Nature has gone haywire, or that the Spirit does not soar. No, no, no. It means that we need to wait, but not just wait. **We can wait yearningly.*** (I was surprised “spell-check” let me use “yearningly” as a word. I like to think of waiting “yearningly.”)

The desert does not bloom every year, sap quantities vary, and butterflies have their schedules synchronized with the weather. Yet, we do not have to despair and think that all is lost. Not at all. *God’s Easter power cannot die*, any more than a butterfly can be held back from soaring when conditions *are* right, any more than sap can be held down when conditions *are* right for sap to rise, any more than a plant can be kept from blooming when conditions *are* right.

Today, on this beautiful day, especially because there is so much “waiting yearningly” going on, conditions may be exactly right for God’s transforming power to bloom in myriad hearts and situations around the world.

Are conditions exactly right in your life? ⁱⁱ

The conditions were right for disciples to be transformed, and not only that, but millions of people since them. The conditions may be right today, for you to live as fully as God intends—that is, you can truly bloom.

If that is the case, I want you to take in the Hallelujahs at the end of this worship as a personal “Amen” to conditions being just right for you! Celebrate your blooming! Celebrate the sap rising in you! Celebrate your soaring!

[Collage of images of blooming, soaring, sap, pancakes... happy people and the Jesus image] All of us, in all conditions, can celebrate Easter with abandonment today, with excitement and joy! If we are not exactly blooming, then we can be “waiting yearningly,” and that is an affirmation that Transforming Power never dies. Smell and see beautiful blooming plants. Eat pancakes with lots of maple syrup! Let us rejoice that the Anointed One rose, and has raised our fellow human beings to new levels for centuries! **[Image of Jesus and butterfly].**

ⁱ J. Brendonly Douglas, “Clergywomen, A Sisterhood of Change,” *WellSprings, A Journal for United Methodist Clergywomen*. TN: Nashville, Division of Ordained Ministry, Winter 1989, Vol. 1 No. 2, 42-44

ⁱⁱ Sometimes conditions are exactly right. There were many narratives of Jesus’ appearance to people in the early church. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all talk of Mary Magdalene seeing Jesus on Easter morning at the tomb. John tells of himself and Peter going to the tomb and seeing the linen cloths. Like detectives, they figured out Jesus’ body could not have been stolen, for the cloths would not have remained there. The disciples walked and talked with him that evening, and later, on a road.