

## **2019 04 21 – The Mourning Cloak**

### **Luke 24: 1-12**

This year in my Easter letter I mentioned that I was still waiting to hear the beautiful song of the Meadowlark. For me, hearing that wonderful series of notes is the sure sign that spring has arrived. Well just a week later, I was hiking the Prairie Vista Trail at Saskatchewan Landing and was thrilled to hear not one but two Meadowlarks singing their songs to each other. On that particular day my hiking partner and I also saw lots and lots of prairie crocuses along the sides of the coulees. The signs of spring were everywhere!

As we were hiking up the path to the top of the hill, our eyes were often focussed downwards to avoid tripping over a rock or an exposed root. And down near the ground I caught sight of another harbinger of spring. It was a large, dark butterfly! For a while it flitted ahead of us on the path as if it was trying to lead us somewhere and then eventually it disappeared. But before it was gone I carefully took note of the velvet brown wings and their lacy cream-coloured edge. I was determined to find out the name of our winged companion.

It was a few days later when I finally got a chance to Google its description. I was amazed to discover that this particular butterfly is called a “Mourning Cloak,” that’s mourning spelled with a “u.” This butterfly is named for a type of dark coat that a few centuries ago would have been worn during times of mourning.

We have all experienced those dark times in our lives. Over the past couple of weeks I've met with four different families who are just beginning their own mourning period. We mourn when loved ones die, when relationships end, when jobs are lost, when projects fail, when we move and leave friends behind, and even when our youth disappears.

The three women who arrived at the tomb just as the sun was rising also knew the pain of grief. Their rabbi and dear friend had been crucified two days before and his body hastily placed in this hole in the rock. No doubt, the women came with eyes swollen from weeping and lack of sleep. They came carrying spices because they were hoping to prepare Jesus' body for a proper Jewish burial. They arrived as early as they could because the body had already been lying there for more than a day. Saturday was their Sabbath, a day when they were not allowed to do any work. That extra day of waiting and weeping must have seemed endless.

When we mourn, when we move through difficult times in our lives, it can sometimes seem like we are in a dark cave or as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm describes it the "darkest valley." It is a type of depression, a time of waiting, a time that can feel confining and even boring. I remember when I was mourning the loss of my first significant relationship, I didn't understand why it took so long for me to even want to go out and be with my friends. It was like I was hibernating, living in a wintering den. I wanted to be free, but I wasn't ready, and the endless waiting was so incredibly frustrating.

As I researched the Mourning Cloak butterfly, one of the things that I discovered was this butterfly doesn't go south in the fall like the Monarch. Instead it cyro-hibernates through our Saskatchewan winters. It hides under loose bark, or under a rock or in a tree cavity and it freezes solid for the winter. It stays there in its winter den safe from predators and waits through blizzard, and ice storms and -40 degree temperatures. It waits knowing that eventually spring will come. It waits knowing that the warmth of the sun will be enough to bring it back to life. Eventually the Mourning Cloak will be able to leave its wintering den and its wings will thaw and it will fly off to find a mate.

The Mourning Cloak butterfly has much to teach us about surviving the adverse conditions that arise in our lives. When we find ourselves in our own wintering dens, in our own dark valleys, then we need to remember that eventually spring will arrive, that eventually new life will be possible. When we experience the loneliness, the frustration and the emotional turmoil that occurs in the midst of the dark night of the soul, it is important to know that God is with us right where we are and that eventually new life will emerge.

The Mourning Cloak butterfly depends on the coming of the warm spring sun and waits for its heat so that its body and wings can be thawed. Our new life comes not from the warmth of the sun but instead from the healing power of love: the love that surrounds us in difficult times; the love and support that we receive from friends and family; and the love of the Ground of our Being, the God that is with us even in the darkest valleys or the coldest wintering den.

In fact, those dark times are often the times when God's presence, God's Spirit of love, peace and comfort seems stronger than ever. It's not that God is paying more attention to us; it's that we are paying more attention to God. During the mourning periods of our lives, we are often forced to slow down and this leaves time for us to turn to the Holy Mystery. It leaves time for the power of the Spirit to heal our hearts, our bodies and our souls.

Ideas from: <https://www.adventive.ca/files/April%202008%20devotional.pdf>

We know that new life is possible because when the women looked into the tomb on that first Easter morning, it was empty. That empty tomb, like the empty wintering den of the Mourning Cloak butterfly, is a symbol of resurrection and re-birth. It is a symbol of the new life that is possible even in death.

We don't have to believe that Jesus' body came back to life, that somehow it was resuscitated. Resurrection is new life in a different form. Over the winter, the Mourning Cloak butterfly changes to a deeper brown and its lacy edges change from white to cream. When the Risen Christ appeared to the disciples they had difficulty recognizing him. When we emerge from our own valleys and dens, we are changed too, changed for the better.

For me, the empty tomb represents the new life that the disciples found after Jesus died. Even as they mourned, even as they returned to Galilee, to their own wintering den, they were able to feel the Risen Christ with them and to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Eventually, they were able to emerge from their dark valley and to continue Jesus' work in the world.

Just as Jesus disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and started to build the church, just as the Mourning Cloak butterfly comes to life after being frozen for an entire winter, so we can survive even the deepest loss, even the most heart-breaking grief. We can survive and thrive; we can begin our lives anew; because we know the healing power of God's unconditional and everlasting love.