

Dear Member or Friend of First Community Church,

All of us at First Community Church wish you and your loved ones a most blessed Easter! May the Spirit of the Risen Christ be with you!

This Easter will be different from any Easter that we have experienced. It has been so strange not to meet as the gathered church for worship throughout the deeply reflective period of Lent. This Lent, as you will note as soon as I am able to post my sermons online in both a written and audio form, we were going to focus on six deeply meaningful events of Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, we would have celebrated Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the palm cross would have covered the reformation cross on the altar. Then we would have met for a simple soup and bread meal on Maundy Thursday, a time of fellowship leading up to the profoundly touching Maundy Thursday Office of Tenebrae and our participation in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, gathering around the table with our Lord just as the disciples did at the Last Supper. Good Friday would have been a day of reflection on the passion of our Lord. And then—Easter! The single most important day in the Christian church year!

Some of us (those who embrace suffering as an integral part of Christian spirituality) would have met by the side of the lake in Hopkinton at sunrise for the United Parishes of Southborough ecumenical sunrise service. This is the first time in the past twenty-two years that I have not preached at or at least attended the sunrise service. And this year there will be no ice on the lake—it promises to be an absolutely beautiful day! Then we meet in our sanctuary, graced with lilies and the lily cross, the Lenten cross adorned with white rather than purple, to sing the glorious resurrection hymns and celebrate our Lord's resurrection.

This Lenten season, this Palm Sunday, this Holy Week, and this Easter have been different. We have been devastated by a virus, a pandemic that has spread like wildfire throughout the world. We have obediently, sensibly hunkered down in place, leaving the safety of our houses only when absolutely necessary. During this period, which has brought hardships to many of us, we have become acutely aware of those in our state, in our country, and around the world who are suffering from this pandemic much more than we. Perhaps this will be one of the positive outcomes of this crisis: a renewed and deepened sense of compassion for those who do not have access to the resources that so many of us can utilize.

My heart goes out to you if you are suffering in any way from this difficult ordeal. I wish I could tell you when and how this will end, when we can get back to "normal" as families, as a church, and as a nation, but we just don't know. I guess this is a little like Holy Week for Jesus and the disciples; we don't know how it will end, but we can go through it together and hope, and trust in God's gracious, healing love.

Many of us have been touched in one way or another by this wilderness experience. One of my clients just informed me that his mother, who was in a nursing home, has died from the COVID-19 virus. He and his sisters were not able to be with their mother in her last days; they were not able to be with her at the time of her passing; and they will not be able to

celebrate her life in a memorial service until sometime later in the year. And I, his therapist, am not able to be with him at this difficult time in his life.

This time, this crisis, has served as a reminder of how important we are to each other. It reminds us of the importance of love, of caring, of compassion, of presence. It reminds us of the importance of community, the kind of community we have and celebrate in our little church. I know we are with each other in prayer, but I wish we could also be with each other in person. Presence, touch means so much.

When I think of how God will be able to use this crisis period in our lives for good, I am reminded of the following reflection by Kathleen O'Meara (1839-1888), an Irish--French Roman Catholic writer of the late Victorian period. I don't know what was happening in Europe at the time when she wrote this, but I believe she captures the true spirit of what we are going through, as well as the promise of rebirth, of renewal, of resurrection when she writes,

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and grew gardens full of fresh food, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply.

Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to love and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

This is my prayer for us, for our nation, and for our world this Easter!

Faithfully yours,
Pastor Paul