

## EASTER CAN BE TODAY . . . OR TOMORROW!

(04/12/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9  
John 20:1-18

*“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” (Isaiah 25:7)*

Happy Easter everyone! I wish we could be together on this beautiful day, on this special day, on this day of all days! And we can—in spirit!

This Easter has started differently from my celebration of Easter the past twenty-two years. This is the first Sunday since becoming the pastor of the First Community Church that I have not preached at or at least attended the United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service at Hopkinton State Park. I missed seeing the sun rise on this special day, and the wonderful spirit of all those from the various churches who meet together, who meet as one in worship by the side of the lake. However, I confess that I didn’t miss having to get up around 5:00 a.m. and driving in the darkness to the lake at a time when Dunkin is not even open!

Today, at least as it has begun, is absolutely beautiful! We have had such a relatively warm winter that I held out hope we wouldn’t be crowding together this morning to brace against the cold. I recall several Easters when the lake was covered with ice. It would have been nice to see the buds emerging on the trees and the daffodils in full bloom throughout the state park. Oh well, maybe next year—if we are through this pandemic by then!

I like it when Easter comes “late,” when we celebrate it in April rather than March. This leads me to wonder why they constantly change the date of Easter. And, by the way, who are the “they,” the ecclesiastical dignitaries who seem determined every second or third year not only to make the sunrise service faithful suffer, but also take the fun out of the festival for little children by scheduling Easter in March? Don’t they know that children should be able to engage in Easter egg hunts without wearing snowsuits, to wear their new dresses and hats to church without having to bundle up in overcoats when they leave. There are mothers of young children who would like to have a word or two with the church authorities who set the date for Easter!

I’m sorry, but it would not do any good to raise your objections with the ecclesiastical authorities who set the date. The date of Easter is set by a formula which was established at the Council of Nicea, the first great church council which was called by the Emperor Constantine in

325 C.E. It's not a very well-known formula. In fact, how many of you reading this sermon or listening to the audio version of it can tell me how the date of Easter is determined every year? Put up your hands. Aha, it's just as I thought; you really don't know! You probably believe it is a secret or esoteric teaching, something that only the clergy know because the formula is too powerful to entrust to the laity.

For the longest time, well into my theological studies, I thought we celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the beginning of Passover. We know Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to prepare for the celebration of the Passover. Jesus' *seder* with his disciples in the Upper Room, however, took on a different meaning when Jesus disclosed that he would be sacrificing his life for them, when he established the Last Supper as a sacrament, a communion, a way to invoke his presence after he had died.

I always believed that since Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, the celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, the time when the angel of death "passed over" the houses of the Israelites, the date of Easter should be set as the first Sunday after the beginning of Passover. After all, one of the reasons why they couldn't take Jesus' body down from the cross on what we know as Holy Saturday was because of the rules of the sabbath. If the Christian church linked Easter to Passover, it would emphasize the theme of sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Paschal or Passover lamb and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. This always made sense to me. Unfortunately, just because something makes sense to me doesn't mean that's the way it is! This is a true (but sad) story.

In one of the great disillusionments of my life (the other having to do with Santa), I discovered that the formula for the date of Easter has nothing to do with Passover. This is why we can have Easter before Passover. Instead of doing it my way, the sensible way, the formula that the church has established for setting the date of Easter is the following: *Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox*. The vernal equinox is the date in spring when the amount of time that is daylight is equal to the amount of time that is darkness. This is the point when daylight becomes a larger part of every day. This occurs on the first day of spring, March 19 this year, the earliest beginning of spring in our lifetime—at least in the Northern Hemisphere.

You may wonder how Easter is related either to the full moon or to the vernal equinox when, historically, it should be tied to the Jewish Passover. The formula seems to tie it more closely to the pagan celebration of spring and the time of the year when light is in the ascendant. This is also true of Christmas. It seems unlikely that Jesus was born in what we now call December. The date that was chosen for the celebration of Christmas was tied to the winter solstice, the darkest day of the year, the time, once again, when daylight would begin to be in the ascendant.

Personally, I like the symbolism. I just don't want to hear Christians say that our religion has nothing to do with paganism when the dates of our two greatest Christian holidays are tied to the winter solstice and the vernal equinox, times of the year that were celebrated as sacred for thousands of years before the coming of Christ. I also don't want to hear Christians say that our religion has no relationship with paganism when our Easter celebration includes little bunnies, chickens, flowers, and eggs, symbols that are not part of the biblical accounts of the resurrection. In fact, the word Easter, which was selected as the name for this religious festival in the 8th century C.E. comes from the name of the Germanic goddess of spring, Oestre. The selection of Easter as the name for the festival of the resurrection ties this holiday to the feminine spirit of spring, of nature, and of new life.

So, in answer to our question regarding when Easter comes, we know that Easter is a day in the Christian year that is determined by a formula that ties it more to spring than to the actual historical event of Jesus' resurrection. We also know that it is considered by most theologians to be the greatest of our Christian festivals. This is because even though the date that we celebrate as Easter may not be the actual date of the resurrection, the resurrection was still an historical event. There *was* an empty tomb. Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead. The Easter event was so profound, so convincing that the crestfallen and discouraged disciples became courageous and inspired believers once again. The Easter event is the cornerstone of our faith, proof that life does not end with the grave, proof of the saving power of God's love!

Easter is also a season. The Easter season is the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost. This period marks the time that, according to the gospels, the risen Lord appeared at various times and places to his disciples. The ecclesiastical color during this season is white, as you would have noted from the color of my stole had we been able to meet for worship. The church

uses white to symbolize newness of life, re-creation, rebirth and transition. This is why we use white for baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and (interestingly) even funerals.

Easter is a day and it is also a season. But Easter is much more than a day, no matter how special it may be, and it is more than a recognition of the time following the resurrection when the disciples experienced the risen Christ in human form. Easter happens all the time—or it can!

Easter happens all the time--if only we can see it! However, we may be blind to Christ's presence in the world, blind to Christ's presence in our lives. Mary mistakenly thought the risen Christ was just the gardener. Jesus Christ was standing right before her, but because she had not yet grasped the miracle of the resurrection, she didn't know what she was seeing.

If Easter is about the rolling away of the stone, then Easter happens all the time--if only we recognize it! When we find ourselves trapped in a lifestyle that is harmful to us or those we love, Easter comes whenever we allow God to roll away the stone that keeps us entombed. It happens when we are willing to change, when we open ourselves to healing. It happens when we choose life over death, no matter how difficult that choice may be. Rolling away the stone, no matter how this happens, is an Easter event.

If Easter is about new life springing forth, then Easter happens all the time--if only we recognize it! Every time people experience the miracle of love, every time a new baby is born--there Easter is happening. Every time we encounter God in worship, in the sacraments, in our personal prayer—there Easter is happening. Every time we feel God's presence in our lives, we witness an Easter event.

If Easter is about healing, about God's love, about God's power over darkness, then Easter happens all the time--if only we recognize it! Every time we extend a helping hand to those in need; every time we experience a healing of relationships or memories; every time the shining beacon of hope drives back the darkness of despair--there Easter is happening. Every time the new shoots of life sprout forth from the dark, cold days of our personal winters, we witness an Easter event, Christ's healing power which is present in the world and in our lives.

As you know, we have a prayer list in this church. We pray for the people on our prayer list and others whom we know to be in need because we believe in the healing power of prayer. We know God works for healing in the world and in our lives, and that God can use our prayers

for the healing of those who are in special need. And so, we pray especially hard at this time of crisis for our nation and for our world.

The people for whom we pray have told us how comforting it is to know that someone cares enough to hold them in their prayers. If you have ever gone through a personal or family crisis, you know how comforting it is to be remembered by people in their prayers, even people you don't know. During those dark times of our lives when we feel alone and lost, those wilderness times when we feel cut off from God and from a sense of God's healing presence in our life, we need this sense of being connected to other people, to the church, and through the church to God.

As we have learned through our experience of intercessory prayer, prayer is more than just being comforted by knowing people are praying for us, though this is certainly important. Prayer is more than just a way to build authentic Christian community, though this, too, is important. Prayer changes the person who is praying.

We are changed when we pray. When we see ourselves or other people through the eyes of Jesus, it shapes our understanding, our feelings, and our relationships. But prayer is even more than this. Prayer can change the world. Prayer can facilitate physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Miracles can happen through prayer. Easter can come into our lives and the lives of others through prayer--if only we are open to recognize it!

Easter is a day in our church year, a season in the church calendar. Easter happened two thousand years ago, but Easter also happens time and time again in the world, in our church, in your life and in mine. Easter happens in small ways and large, in ways we recognize and ways we don't. It happens whenever God's redeeming love rolls back the stone to lead us forth into life. It happens whenever the darkness of despair is driven back by the shining light of hope. It happens when emotional wounds are healed, when spiritual distance is replaced by an experience of God's presence, and it also happens when a miracle of healing takes place in our bodies. Easter can come through the healing power of prayer, your prayer and mine, as we hold those in special need before God.

How can we listen to the testimony of those healed by prayer and not believe in the risen Christ? How can we witness to the caring outreach of our church community, the many ways in which our members reach out to each other, and not believe in the power of God's love? How

can we witness to the eternal spring that blossoms forth in the world around us and not celebrate Easter? Think of the ways in which God has touched your life, the times when the darkness of despair and the power of death were overcome with light and love. Easter happens all the time, around the world, in this church, and in our lives--if only we have the sense to recognize it. Easter is not just an event in the past. Easter is what we are about as a church!

As Angelus Silesius said so long ago: "Christ is forever rising from the grave; the Spirit cannot be held captive in a cave."

I don't know when the restrictions that we have embraced (or at least reluctantly accepted) to stem the tide of this pandemic will end. When they do, and they will, we will need to celebrate. When we finally can return to church, I think it would be especially meaningful to share a meal together--perhaps the Palm Sunday breakfast we were unable to enjoy last week. I think it would be especially meaningful during worship to share together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And, in some way, I think we will need to celebrate Easter. We will need to celebrate the resurrection that can be celebrated, that can be experienced at any time on any date, not just on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

"Christ is *forever* rising from the grave." In this season, as we struggle with the darkness of the pandemic that is sweeping the globe, that is impacting so many of us physically, emotionally, and financially, that is claiming the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters, of our loved ones, we need to have a sense of the presence of God, that God who can roll back the stone from our tombs, that God who can bring the healing power of the risen Christ to us, to our families, to our nation, and to the world.

If this can happen to us, then, like Mary and the disciples so many years ago, we will know the true meaning of Easter!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
www.firstcommunitychurch.com  
April 12, 2020*