Dear Friends,

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!

We are still in the Easter season and will be for several weeks. It is good that we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord for a week of weeks, especially during this pandemic. We need to be reminded of the new life that is ours in the risen Christ.

We have been under stay at home orders for about a month now. For some, this has been an inconvenience. For others, this has been a true hardship and a time of suffering – either because home is not a safe place or because you have no place to call home. Some of you have been staying at home alone and finding it difficult to fight loneliness. Some of you wish for a little more alone time as your household has felt more than full with all the responsibilities of teaching children and maintaining your work schedules. Some of you have not been able to stay at home because you work essential jobs. Some of you have lost work and are facing financial hardships, Some of you have lost a loved one to COVID19 or to other causes and are now trying to find ways to grieve that don't include the usual rituals we have to help us.

While we are in this pandemic together, we are not all affected in the same ways. This pandemic has exposed the inequalities of life in New Jersey (and across the country) – in healthcare, with access to community services, how wealth is distributed, and by systemic racism. These are issues our synod has been working on for many years; and we continue to do so during this time. We are especially mindful of the rise in anti-Asian rhetoric and harassment and we denounce it as the sin it is.

I am aware of a growing weariness for abiding by our governor's orders not to gather and to remain at home to the extent possible. Several pastors have contacted me because they are getting pressure to re-open their buildings and allow people to begin to gather again for worship. I want to be clear: if you do that, you are exposing yourself and your people not only to infection but also to legal action for breaking the governor's orders. When given the green light to hold in person worship, we will do so but not before.

Thank you to worship leaders, preachers, and musicians who have been providing worship opportunities for your communities. I am so appreciative of your faithful and creative efforts -- whether by livestream or recording, at the church building or in your home -- you have proclaimed God's life-giving word. In an effort to provide you with time off, we are working on providing a worship service recording that you can use on the Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 3) if you choose. We will provide both an English and Spanish resource.

Finally, let me say a word of thanks to all of you providing essential services to your community: healthcare workers, truck drivers, grocery store employees, janitors, trash collectors, police officers, firefighters, first responders, food service workers, government employees, delivery people, and others. Our Lutheran sense of vocation tells us that you are doing holy work by serving your neighbors. Thank you!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Living in hope with you,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew