

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

March 25, 2026



HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY March 29 at 10 am

Celebrating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, palm branches will be given out to the congregation.

MAUNDY THURSDAY April 2 at 7 pm

A service of readings and the Lord's Supper.

EASTER SUNDAY April 5 at 10 am

Uplifting preaching, warm fellowship and inspiring hymns will make this a memorable day.

PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

One- a-penny, Two-a-penny, Hot-Cross-Buns

For weeks now, every trip to our local supermarket has included a wishful side glance at the stack of aluminum pans stuffed with distinctive hot cross buns. I've resisted in impulse to buy them, however. I think of hot cross buns as something to eat during holy week and on Good Friday.

While hot cross buns are mostly associated with Good Friday, their history is a lot more complicated. For one thing, a cross made of icing tops each bun. But is it really a cross? Some culinary historians say the cross on a hot cross bun is actually much older than Good Friday and Easter. This peculiar bun is entangled with an equally complicated history of why we call the celebration of the Resurrection "Easter."

Unlike English, all our major neighboring languages—French, Italian, and Spanish, for example—call the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection by a name derived from scripture itself. In French, it's "Pâques." The Spanish would say, "Pascus." The Italians use "Pascuas." These are all variants of a word used in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which itself comes from the Hebrew Bible. In biblical Hebrew, the celebration of the Hebrews' flight from Egyptian slavery is called "pesach," meaning "to pass over." It refers to the angel of death "passing over" the Hebrew doorways marked with the blood of the lamb slaughtered and eaten by them that night. Pesach is the name for the Jewish feast celebrating this liberation and a reminder that all liberation from oppression involves sacrifice.

Jesus' last supper, which we will observe next Thursday night at our Maundy or Holy Thursday 7:00 p.m. worship, was most likely a Jewish Passover meal. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus sends his disciples to find a room to celebrate the Passover seder. "I have earnestly desired to eat this 'pascha' with you before I suffer," he tells them in Luke 22:15. Early Christians thus observed Jesus' last supper, crucifixion, and resurrection as occurring within the larger framework of the Jewish Passover. They described Jesus as the Passover lamb sacrificed to set the world free from death-dealing powers and principalities of domination, slavery, and sin. Hence Pâque, Pascus, and Pascuas.

But not the English-speaking world. We call the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, Easter. Why? According to the Venerable Bede, an 8th-century Northumbrian monk who wrote the first history of the English-speaking church, Germanic tribes who began migrating into the British Isles in the 4th century, preferred to describe the celebration of Jesus' resurrection as "Eastre" or "Eostre," which just happened to be the term for a spring feast celebrating the pagan goddess Ōstre whose name means "dawn." So English-speakers call what many liturgies derived from Latin texts and traditions still call "our paschal feast" by a name much older than Christianity itself: Easter.

Which brings us back to those hot cross buns. Like the name Easter, they too are likely much older than Christianity itself. Ancient Greeks shared recipes for several different types of sweet wheat breads that were specifically eaten at the time of the Spring Equinox in honor of the new moon. Each loaf was stamped with a curved symbol, like an ox's horn, and that gives us some clue to the etymology of the "bun." "Boun" is the ancient Greek word for "ox." It's not impossible that our hot cross buns eaten around the spring equinox go back to a much older tradition from deep history in which we are still participating when we eat them at Easter.

The most likely origin of our modern, cross-anointed buns derives from a 12th-century monk at St. Albans. A 14th-century history of St. Albans writes of "a monk working in the refectory, Brother Thomas Roccliffe," who created a recipe and distributed a cross-marked bun to the local poor on Good Friday. "These cakes so pleased the palates of the people," the author continues, that "various were the attempts to imitate the cakes of Father Roccliffe all over the country, but the recipe of which was kept within the walls of the Abbey." So there you have it. Our hot cross buns come from a secret recipe and were marked with the sign of the cross, perhaps in imitation of the image of a cross pressed into the communion wafers that Thomas Roccliffe also baked in his monastery refectory.

During Queen Elizabeth I's long reign, there were strict controls on the making and sale of bread. Bread with spices like cinnamon, coriander, nutmeg, and cardamon were only permitted on certain special occasions, one of which was Good Friday. People began, then, to associate a cross-topped bun mixed with special spices and sold only on Good Friday with the spices the women brought to Jesus' tomb and used to anoint his body.

It was not a huge stretch for the popular imagination to endow these spice-filled, cross-anointed buns that were available only on Good Friday with almost magical powers. They were believed never to mold like ordinary bread. Healing powers, especially for stomach problems, were attributed to them. Some hot cross buns were kept all year as a sign of lasting friendship. An English proverb promised, "Half for you and half for me. Between us two shall goodwill be." If you hung a hot cross bun from your kitchen ceiling, it promised to bring you good luck all year long. One pub in London, which was formerly a home, has hundreds of old hot cross buns hung each year in a net from the ceiling. A practice reaching back to the Napoleonic Wars.

So, next week, on Good Friday, enjoy some hot cross buns, although I doubt the mass-produced ones we'll find in markets will be likely to last a whole year, even if we hung them from our ceilings. Have one with your morning coffee. Enjoy its sweet taste and, most of all, appreciate still more the rich tapestry of Christian and human history baked into it. Let its lily-white cross remind you of the cross on which Jesus died on a Good Friday long ago. May the scent of its spices bring to mind the spices that Mary and the other women brought to the tomb to anoint Jesus' lifeless body. And let the taste of its dried fruit and citrus bits be a foretaste of Easter morning's sweetness and joy.

But don't forget also to appreciate the rich tapestry of time, history, and culture that are baked into each bite. Like so much of what we as contemporary Christians do, baked into these humble hot cross buns is an enduring story of human faith and celebration, of superstition and imagination.

May a meaningful Palm Sunday and Holy Week be ours,
Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

NOTE OF THANKS

M&O would like to thank all for your interest and willingness to fill the open spot we had on our committee. Happy to report we now have a full committee and are excited to continue, with your support, to joyfully serve our community with compassion and caring.

FLOWERS FOR EASTER

The Flower Committee and the Board of Deacons invite you to remember, and honor loved ones or offer celebration for a joyous event. Memorial & Celebration donors will be listed in the Easter bulletin.

In order to be included in the Easter bulletin, your form must be returned to the church office by Sunday, March 29. Call the church if you would like to be included.

PRAYER FOR HOLY WEEK *adapted from a prayer of St. Anselm of Canterbury*

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to yourself. Turn our despair to hope through your sweet goodness. Through your gentleness we find comfort in times of fear. Your warmth gives life to the dead. Lord Jesus: in your mercy, heal us. In your love and tenderness remake us. In your compassion, bring us grace and forgiveness. For the beauty of eternity may your love prepare us. Amen.



First Congregational Church

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

Web: churchontherotary.org ~ email: office@churchontherotary.org ~ 413.525.4121