

Holy Week 2020 in Costa Rica

Easter Monday 2020

Easter greetings in the name of the Resurrected Christ,

I had planned to send this missionary update last weekend, principally to let you know how our family has been faring since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. But first, I need to share a piece of family news.

Grieving the Death of Marta's Father

We received the news on Maundy Thursday, just minutes after returning from an afternoon walk. One of Marta's sisters-in-law called from Guatemala to let us know that Marta's father had just died at home.

The news wasn't totally unexpected. Her father (**Juan Pablo Giron Ochoa**) was 83 and his health had been failing. Marta's younger sister has been the live-in caregiver for both of their parents. The family homestead is in an isolated village in southwest Guatemala. Marta's mother gets around with a walker but can't do as much for herself since she fell and fractured a hip eight years ago. Subsequently, her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's; over time, he became increasingly difficult to care for as Marta witnessed during her recent trips to Guatemala.

Shortly after Marta's most recent visit in January, a local physician informed the family that nothing more could be done medically for Marta's father. His prognosis was correct. Juan became increasingly weaker, lost his appetite and the desire to get out of bed. Finally, his heart simply stopped beating.

Were we not living under COVID-19 quarantine restrictions, Marta would have traveled to Guatemala to spend Holy Week 2020 with her parents; she would have been there when her father died. Given that air travel between Costa Rica and Guatemala has been suspended for nearly a month, our only option was to grieve from afar and communicate as best we could with Marta's mother and siblings.

Telecommunications have worked better than we expected. In addition to phone calls, one of Marta's cousins filmed the simple wake that took place in the Giron home late Thursday night. That same cousin also live-streamed the midday burial ceremony on Good Friday from the town cemetery.

While all of this was transpiring, I recalled a weekend news program that I saw on Palm Sunday about how Costa Rican churches, Catholic & Evangelical, have been functioning since the onset of the pandemic. Both church leaders agreed that adapting their funeral practices has been their single, most difficult challenge, at a time when neither funeral services nor graveside ceremonies are permitted.

For all of us, and especially for Marta's immediate family, the grieving process has been and will continue to be difficult, given the impossibility of an extended family gathering any time soon because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Situation in Costa Rica

In terms of our personal health, Marta and I are doing fine. Like you in the US, we're staying home. For me, working from home is relatively easy. With a decent Internet connection and electricity to keep my laptop and cell phone charged, I can work pretty much from anywhere.

For Marta's work with Costa Rica & Nicaraguan women, not being able to make weekly trips to the La Carpio neighborhood in San Jose has been far more disruptive.



She's relying on WhatsApp and other social media networks to communicate with each member of her 2020 group (pictured above), but the mutual fellowship and support that they look forward to every Thursday afternoon is impossible to replicate via a cell phone screen.

The first case of COVID-19 in Costa Rica was confirmed on March 6. In the 5+ weeks since then, the number of confirmed cases has climbed to 612 (as of noon on Easter Monday), in a country with a total population of just over 5 million.

Costa Rican health authorities have been doing everything possible to "flatten the curve", with good success. For the past two weeks, the number of new cases has been averaging between 15-20/day – no threat yet of the exponential increases that are occurring elsewhere in the world, including the U.S.

Thus far, only 3 Costa Ricans have died from COVID-19, and the number of patients requiring hospitalization has been well within the capacity of the country's universal health care system. Currently, there are only 20 patients whose symptoms are serious enough to require hospitalization; 14 of those are in intensive care.

In truth, Marta and I feel extremely fortunate to live and serve in a country where access to health care is considered a human right for all residents, Costa Ricans and foreigners alike.

In contrast to the public health situation, the economic situation in Costa Rica is far more serious. The adverse economic consequences have been dramatic & immediate for a country where tourism is the most important sector of the economy.

Normally, at this time of year, Costa Rica would be reaping the benefits of tourist "high season". Instead, 2020 is being called the "zero season" for tourism. Beaches and other popular tourist destinations are closed, hotels & restaurants are empty, and tens of thousands of workers within the tourism industry have lost their jobs virtually overnight.

Costa Rican Lutheran Church (ILCO) Continues to Function

Our companion church here in Costa Rica is facing the same challenges as ELCA synods and congregations – figuring out creative ways to sustain core church activities like weekly worship. There have been no weekend services in churches or homes since March 15. The dedication ceremony of a new chapel for the Sola Gratia community here in Grecia (where we live) had to be cancelled; it was scheduled for Palm Sunday.

ILCO pastors and members remain connected via WhatsApp groups that were organized prior to the pandemic. ILCO's pastor president created a new chat group for all pastors and staff. Pastors and lay leaders are learning to use different social media platforms (like Zoom) to livestream weekend worship services and other community activities. In fact, Marta and I were able to participate in an Easter Vigil devotional via Zoom last Saturday evening.

On Easter Sunday, we received the photo that is reproduced on this page, taken by a semi-retired ILCO pastor. He erected a rustic cross in the yard of his house on Good Friday. On Easter Sunday, Pastor Enrique added flowers at the base and a handwritten inscription which reads: **"He's not on the cross, nor in the tomb. He has risen in your heart and in mine."** It was his Easter sermon and affirmation of faith.

Looking ahead to the rest of the Easter season and beyond, it's highly improbable that "being church" will go back to the way it was prior to the pandemic. We are being challenged to create a new vision of what the church might look like on the downside of the curve.

As ELCA Presiding Bishop Eaton wrote recently: **"Some of it will be the same, some of it will be remarkably different, but there will be church."**



We have lots of prayerful reflection ahead of us, as members of Christ's body around the world. Here's a prayer from the ELCA web site that I have adapted. Feel free to use it, or change it and make it your own:

Loving and merciful God, we pray for all nations of the world as we face a myriad of uncertainties around coronavirus. Protect the sick and vulnerable among us, including migrants and refugees who have nowhere to "shelter in place". Grant a special measure of protection for health care workers who serve others at their own personal risk. Raise our sights and spirits as we consider how best to respond in our families, congregations and communities. Give us courage to face the future with compassion, concern and loving service; all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.

Your companion in global mission,

Stephen Deal

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