

“Resilient Together”

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Church in Boston

March 8, 2026

Two weeks ago, we were prepping for the arrival of the Blizzard of 2026 later that night. Today? The snow is melting away as temperatures rise into the 50's.

Two months ago, on January 7, Renée Good was shot and killed by an ICE agent in Minneapolis, sparking national protests against ICE. Today? The ICE presence is significantly smaller in the Twin Cities and Homeland Security Director Kristi Noem was fired on Friday.

Two years ago, on March 5, Super Tuesday was held with Presidents Biden and Trump winning their respective contests. Alongside the election news, headlines covered the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza after five months of devastating war between Hamas and Israel. Today? Trump is in the second year of his second term. And, although heavy fighting in Gaza has receded, the escalation of war by the U.S., Israel, and Iran has undermined security for millions in the region.

Six years ago today, on March 8, 2020, also a Sunday, [the Boston Globe reported](#) 15 new cases of coronavirus—bringing the state's total up to 28—while also stating, “The risk of Covid-19 to the general public in Massachusetts remains low at this time, state health officials said.” But just two days later Governor Charlie Baker issued a state of emergency. And by the next Sunday evening, on [March 15, Baker](#) closed schools for three weeks and banned group gatherings of more than 25. The lockdown had begun.

Over the past weeks, months, and recent years, we have faced pandemic, wars, ongoing political divisiveness, and a hard winter. If you are feeling tired and stressed, there are real reasons to feel so. As President Obama said at Friday's [funeral for Jesse Jackson](#), “We are living in a time when it can be hard to hope.”

How then will we make it through this hard time? Where might we find hope? How might we cultivate the resilience we need to persevere?

People commonly speak of resilience as “bouncing back”—as if you hit a rough spot that disrupts things and then you pick up the pieces to start up again where you left off. And while that may be true in some circumstances, author Alice Scannell suggests another approach in her book, *Building Resilience*. Scannell, a gerontologist and Episcopal priest, proposes the idea of *radical resilience*. She writes:

When adversity permanently changes our reality, there is no going back to the way things were. Resilience then becomes the work of *coming through* the adversity so that, at least on most days, we see our life as still worth living.” (2)

After living through the pandemic, I think we all know what it is to experience a permanently changed reality.

Do you remember Sunday, March 8, 2020?

Here at First Church, the doors were still open. Rev. Stephen Kendrick preached. The choir sang. At 4pm, a concert of new music by Larry Bell was held. But, by Thursday, March 12, Rev. Kendrick and Standing Committee Chair Michael Sullivan sent a special e-news canceling church programming, while also optimistically stating, “Our doors will not close on any Sunday!” While a service was held that Sunday, March 15, the choir was no longer rehearsing and attendance was down. And on that evening Governor Baker banned gatherings of 25 or more. Our doors closed.

We really had no idea how much our lives were about to change, did we?

In March of 2020, George Floyd was still alive. After Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police on May 25, the summer of 2020 witnessed an explosion of national protests. Here at First Church, a Black Lives Matter sign had hung in the window for some years. And even before the shutdown, the Social Justice Community hosted a Zoom session entitled “Boston, Unitarians, and the Struggle for Racial Justice” on February 28. These conversations around racial justice would continue on Zoom in the months to come.

Six years ago, could you have imagined we would encounter and endure all that we have?

With over one million dead, the Covid-19 pandemic is the deadliest disaster in U.S. history. The hopeful protests for racial justice generated both some changes in police accountability *and* a massive backlash which contributed to a rise in white Christian nationalism. Our democracy groans beneath stresses of distrust, lies, and corruption.

As some of you know, I moved last spring to a new home next to the Charles River. Beside my house, a small dam creates a mill pond, which has been frozen over since January. Just below the dam, the river has continued to flow, free of ice. As temperatures have warmed this past week, I have eagerly been watching the river, wondering when the sheet of ice will give way to the flow of water again. As we have heard again and again this winter from the streets of Minneapolis and beyond, *ice melts*.

Ice melts. Winter gives way to spring. Life returns. Snowbanks may still abound, but the slushy, messy puddles remind us of this melting. Change is happening.

And as we move towards this new season, the world is not the same as it was when we last saw the Charles free of ice, the ducks swim in the pond of the Public Garden, or the green, grassy expanse of the Boston Common.

The capacity to *move through* a changed landscape is at the core of radial resilience. “It’s *radical*,” writes Scannell, “because it connects with the roots of our being. Radical resilience draws from our essential self, demanding that we engage with meaning and hope in new ways in order to feel that our life is still worth living.” (3) Resilience is not simply bouncing back to what *was*; resilience is drawing upon what is essential and adapting to a changed world.

As a process of adaptation, resilience can be taught, practiced, and strengthened. In Scannell’s book, she traces ten resilience skills including: mindfulness, courage, perseverance, flexibility, reframing, creativity, realistic optimism, hope, physical activity, and spirituality. (xviii) While I do not have time to expand on each of these, I want to take a moment to consider a couple, starting with flexibility.

Flexibility calls for us to consider alternative possibilities. For psychologist Al Siebert, we can become more flexible by developing “‘oppositional traits,’ such as the ability to be strong *and* gentle, messy *and* neat, humorous *and* serious,” and so on. (44) Embracing a framework of “both/*and*” rather than “either/*or*” broadens our thinking. Instead of trying to identify the single “best” option, both/*and* thinking challenges us to consider the merits of multiple possibilities as we move towards solutions that creatively combine ideas—or even create an entirely new solution.

Similarly, when Scannell proposes “realistic optimism” as a resilience skill, she is suggesting we combine elements of *both* pessimism *and* optimism. Whereas optimism contributes a hopeful outlook of possibility, pessimism insists on a realistic assessment of risk and challenges. Without a dose of realism, optimism can be wishful thinking. Without some hope in actual change, pessimism can immobilize us.

At this moment in our world, “realistic optimism” feels like a way to hold *both* all that is so difficult *and* our need for hope in a better future.

Earlier this week, I spoke with a young woman who asked me where I was finding hope these days. Somewhat to my surprise, I answered easily, pointing to protestors in the streets as well as ongoing acts of public care and civility. Her question was still on my mind that evening as I was walking back to the church and witnessed a car come to a screeching halt as it turned the corner from Clarendon onto Marlborough. A woman shrieked and the car drove away. With my gut clenched in fear, I approached the corner to find a woman carefully attending to her dog who, fortunately, escaped any harm. At the same time,

another pedestrian also walked up to check than all was ok. When I resumed my walk to the church, yet another pedestrian asked me if everything was ok.

This may seem like the smallest of moments, but it meant a lot to me. In one corner of one neighborhood of one city, three different strangers paid attention to the threat facing this woman and her dog. Radical resilience draws upon what is essential to help us adapt to a changed world. What is more essential than caring for one's neighbor? What is more essential than empathy, kindness, and love?

There is much we do not know about what comes next for us as individuals, a church, a city, or a nation. We are very much living in a changing world. While some of that change is welcome—like the arrival of spring, so much of the change is harmful, difficult, and confusing. Even so, we can practice resilience skills such as flexibility and realistic optimism to help us persevere. And we can do so *together*.

In her poem “Belonging,” Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes,

And if it's true we are alone,
we are alone together,
the way blades of grass
are alone, but exist as a field.

We are here together. Each of us on our own journey of seeking purpose and meaning, but none of us are alone in that search. Like the blades of grass in a field, the notes in a symphony, or the individual cells that make up a body, the coming together with others creates something more than we are alone.

In a world where so much can feel like it's under threat or coming apart, it matters that there are places like this church where we practice coming *together*. It matters that there are communities that remind us of what is essential—calling us to empathy, kindness, and love. It matters that each of you are here as a blade within the field of this community.

Our Stewardship theme of “Resilient Together” is a call to all of us to remember why First Church matters. It is a call to come together to support this church, as we are able, for the essential mission of practicing mutual love, helping one another, and seeking truth and meaning.

Together, we are more resilient to life in a changing world.

May it be so. Ashé. Amen.