

Best wishes to you and your family for a Happy and Most Joyous Easter!

This year, at this most Holy and spiritual time of the church year, we are experiencing an Easter unlike any we have seen in our lifetime. We are now more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic that has gripped the world with a disease that continues to mutate and cause serious health issues in countries throughout the world—rich and poor, highly developed and struggling nations alike have been humbled by this insidious disease. Most of us know a family or acquaintance affected by the pandemic, and we need go no further than our television news to receive updates of the ongoing battle against a virus that, according to a recent report from the World Health organization, has still not been fully determined in origin.

Still, in this Easter season of 2021, there is great hope, just as there should be in every Easter season for every Christian believer. I am reminded of the central message of a sermon our former pastor, Pastor Thomas Richards, gave just a year or two before his retirement in 2016. He suggested that most of us go through life with some basic understanding of Easter as it is taught in Sunday School and lived in our lives within the church, but one day, that understanding changes. There is a sudden or unexpected death in our family, our community, or perhaps our nation. Only then do we begin to fully understand the promise of the resurrection—our circumstances change and we are more fully receptive to the promise of eternal life. Only then do we see the true beauty of Easter in Christ's resurrection.

Our Easter rebirth, our spring rebirth, is especially welcome this year. This year's winter, coupled with the disturbing politics of this time, wore us down. The promises of multiple vaccines encouraged us, but we are only now beginning to see a significant increase in the availability in doses. As I suggested in last month's column, *we pray for patience and we want it right now*. It is good to see vaccination numbers increasing rapidly as more vaccination sites are established at hospitals, retail pharmacies, and even a local landmark—Pocono Raceway.

Here at St. Paul we have pleasant memories of Easter celebrations for children that go back to the 1950's (and for a few of you, even further). Easter egg hunts are an important part of the Easter celebration, and we hosted many of them for our congregation and neighborhood children throughout the decades. When our

congregation was located on Route 611 until 1992, most of the egg hunts were held on the playground of the old Tannersville school (Pocono Township High School and later PEC). There were very few plastic eggs in those days, so dyed eggs needed to be hidden carefully; the old trees of the playground area featured many nooks and crannies for egg hiding. Prizes were awarded to the most successful hunters, but that practice was later eliminated in an effort to provide greater access to children of all ages.

The tradition of giving candy to every child in Sunday School is one that grew out of the Great Depression and World War II. Although chocolate candy is abundant everywhere today, it was in short supply during those decades of sacrifice, and many families simply could not afford to lavish their children with the luxury of chocolate candy. To make sure that every child had something for Easter, the church sponsored the distribution of simple boxes of candy (about the size of a box of animal crackers—4"x2"x 3"), often accompanied by a fresh orange (citrus fruit was also rare during these times). As a youngster, I can remember we would chuckle along with a couple of local kids who would show up two or three Sundays a year to "qualify" for the holiday candy gifts. We didn't care—they were our classmates at school, even if we didn't see them very often at church.

No memories of St. Paul Easter traditions would be complete without a reference to the Easter Bunny and the Easter Chicken. These two costumed characters appeared regularly at our Easter egg hunts here on Fish Hill from 1992 until approximately 2015. Brought to life by fun-loving members of our congregation, these two characters played games with the children, helped distribute candy gifts, and did their best to add some humor and fantasy to the Saturday morning celebrations on Easter weekend. Some current members of St. Paul performed as either bunny or chicken, and a few aspiring actors were fortunate enough to play both roles at one time or another (you know who you are . . .). The costumes are still around somewhere; I hope we will have the need to bring them back for future Easter gatherings.

Finally, the flowers surrounding the altar this Easter season are a tradition honored in churches throughout the world. The lilies, daffodils, hyacinths, and tulips represent the resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the rebirth of spring. In

this time of urgent hope for our nation and our world, we wish for each of you a blessed and spiritually fulfilling Easter.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Bill Below

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