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EASTER MESSAGE

The Lights of Easter

For over one hundred fifty years, Fredericksburg, Texas has had its own special version of the Easter story, a story that dates back to 1847 when John Mueseback and the other men of that small settlement rode out to make a peace treaty with the legendary Comanche Chief, Quannah Parker, on the banks of the San Saba River.

Mueseback was the leader of the German immigrant families who had settled in the Pedernales Valley the year before. As the final points of the treaty were being drawn up on Easter Eve, the Comanche kept watch over the town, wary of a trick on the part of the settlers. They sent smoke signals relaying the progress of the talks, and, at night, their campfires dotted the horizon.

Legend has it that when those pioneer German mothers tried to calm their frightened children and answer their questions about the ominous campfires, one young mother, seeing the fear in her children's eyes, fabricated a story to calm them. She remembered an old German tradition of lighting "Easter fires" on the Saturday before Easter in Germany, where it was customary to extinguish all the lights in the churches, and then to make a new fire. At this fire the great Paschal or Easter candle was lit—"the new fire"—outside the worship center and in a processional it was brought into the sanctuary where it stood as a visible reminder of the presence of the risen Christ. After the blessing of the light (the paschal candle), and after the Christians sang a song of praise called the "Exultet," the Paschal candle was then used to rekindle all the extinguished lights in the church, then a bonfire on some open space near the church. After the Easter bonfire was consecrated, the penitents would bring sticks of oak, walnut, and beech, to char (or light) in the fire, and then take home "the light" so they could start a newly-kindled fire, with a prayer that God will preserve the homestead from fire, lightning, and hail. Thus, every house received "new fire" at Easter.

So, she told the children that the Comanche fires were in honor of Easter, just as was the Easter Eve custom in their native Germany, and that the large bunnies they had encountered in this new land (jack rabbits) were boiling water on these Easter Eve fires to make dye for the eggs they were preparing. She convinced the children that if they would go quickly to sleep, they would find a nest of dyed eggs the next morning.

Soon, the men returned from their successful negotiations with the Comanche, and heard the "new Easter story." Since then, the Easter fires have been re-enacted to celebrate not only Easter, but to remember the successful negotiation of a treaty of peace with the Comanche as well. Over the years, the fires grew into a major event in Fredericksburg with residents spending many weeks gathering wood for the Easter campfires. Hundreds of townspeople played a part in the pageant that was held annually until 2005, when was suspended due to its cost.

As you can see, those hearty pioneers actually had something theological going in their actions. They were following a long tradition started by the first Christians, who began their celebration of Easter Sunday at sundown on Saturday. As the light of Easter

Day arrived and intensified, however, worshipers greeted each other with the ecstatic salutation, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!"

Though we normally associate Christmas with lights, it's really Easter that is all about "light". God said, "Light up the darkness!" (2 Cor. 4:6), and our lives fill with light as we see and understand God in the face of Christ. We have also been charged with displaying "our light" to give light to our entire household, our entire community; to let our light shine before men that they may thereby see our good deeds and, seeing them, praise our God in heaven for those good deeds that our shining light illuminates. Matt. 5:14-16.

Everything that matters in Christianity has roots that run deep into the mystery and truth at the center of Easter: Christ's resurrection, God's rekindled light that illuminated the darkness of Easter Eve. The noted Christian author C.S. Lewis made the point that "...to preach Christianity meant primarily to preach the Resurrection." The Resurrection is the central theme in every Christian sermon reported in the Acts. (See Peter's proclamation at the home of Cornelius, for example. Acts 10:39-43.) The Resurrection is the true "gospel," the true "good news" the Christians accepted. The rest of the story that we call the "gospels," which are the details of Jesus' life and death, were composed later for the benefit of those who had already accepted the truth of His resurrection. They were written to fill in the story for those who accepted the miracle of the Resurrection.

If we do not believe in the Resurrection, we are devoid of a reason to celebrate Easter. (1 Cor. 15:12-28). Paul was very emphatic in this: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Cor. 15:13-14). Without the Resurrection, we can claim no authority and offer no promise because Easter Sunday would have no meaning, would be no different from any other day. The entire Christian year would crumble like an old, discarded calendar because there would be no story of redemption to tell, no meaningful faith to nurture, and no holy pilgrimage to guide. If we hang our hats on any one selected sermon or saying of Christ without first believing the resurrection, then it's a false belief. What sense would Jesus' life make if he had not lived beyond the grave? But a reason to celebrate Easter does exist—Christ is risen!

This season as you celebrate the power and glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, remember the hope of the peace of the tradition of the Easter fires; remember to light your paschal candle symbolic of the rekindling of "the new fire" in your life; remember to preach the gospel of the Resurrection; and you will be proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord!

The great treasure of life is Easter, and the great treasure of Easter is Life, Eternal Life!

The foregoing message was prepared at my request by our Eminent Grand Prelate, Sir Knight James N. Higdon, PGC, KCT.

In His Name,

Thomas W. Snyder
Grand Commander

Hope to See Each of You at Grand Commandery April 19 to 21, 2008

NOTE: The Host Hotel is located at 4099 Valley View Lane. It is not on Luna Road. Please make sure your room reservation is at the correct hotel.