

Pray & Prepare

This is Holy Week, the time when we remember Jesus' last days before his crucifixion and prepare to celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year, the somber mood associated with Good Friday may seem to permeate our outlook to a larger extent than usual. The world is still weighed down by the continuing COVID pandemic (The world has seen 500,878,952 cases & 6,185,040 deaths from the virus as of noon April 13th). The tragedy of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (already millions displaced and thousands dead) fills the news with pictures and stories of horror; the senselessness of mass shootings and other gun violence are a daily part of life in the U.S. Storms, violence, warfare, famine, a sense of impending disaster, and oppressive poverty, make hopefulness and joy hard to come by for many of the people God created around the world. It may be hard to remember that Easter *is* Coming, and what it means!

The Easter gift of new life, redemption, and the possibilities that come with it are a gift, and a challenge. The gift is not like a chocolate egg to be enjoyed and forgotten till next year. It is more like a puzzle from which all of us are given some of the pieces – some of the possibilities. The completed picture will be a wondrous thing! However, if we do not take on the challenge of putting the whole puzzle together; if we work only with 'our' pieces, we will never receive the fullness of the gift the puzzle represents. If we try to force unique pieces together where they do not fit or try to remake everyone's pieces so all are alike, the result will be a distorted mess making the final picture forever unrecognizable. It is only when we accept the challenge with the gift – the challenge of working together with everyone and all the diverse pieces to assemble the puzzle, that the picture – the world Jesus intended for all us to share, will be revealed and made a reality. Prepare to receive and rejoice in Easter's gift, the possibility of living in God's peaceful kingdom – and dust off you community building puzzle working skills!

- **Ukraine:** The invasion continues. Pray that a way to peace can be found. A new Russian offensive is underway. Injury & death totals remain unclear, but estimates are that at least 10,100 civilians have been killed in the city of Mariupol alone. There are reports the Russians are attempting to hide the civilian death toll by hiding or destroying bodies. Some people are being forcibly taken to Russia.
- **The COVID Pandemic.** New COVID case numbers are rising again in the U.S. The new BA.2 variant is now dominant. Some other countries are also seeing climbing case numbers. Some places that lifted safety protocols, but are now reimposing them. Doctors & scientists are continuing to struggle to understand the realities of 'long COVID' & the increased risk of several health issues in those who have recovered from COVID – even mild cases.
- **Sher Lanka** – Corruption has created an economic crisis that is causing food shortages which may become a famine.
- **Nigeria** – Thursday, April 14, marks the 8th anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnaping of the Chibok school girls, some of whom are still missing. An attack in Plateau State this week has left more than 100 people dead, many people injured, & others displaced. This attack was carried out by Fulani Muslims, who are primarily herders, on Hausa & other ethnic groups who are primarily Christians & farmers. Boko Haram, bandits & criminal gangs along with corrupt military & government officials continues to be a threat, especially in parts of the country that have become "ungoverned spaces" where the people are at the mercy of these criminals.
- **Victims of Gun Violence** – there have been 133 mass shootings (up from 121 last week) in 2022. The 2022 gun death total is now 12,030. 439 deaths & 1,058 of the injured are children (17 or younger). Many states, including Ohio, are weakening gun laws, even though the number of homicides & other gun crimes increases where gun laws are weakened. There are 393 million civilian owned guns in the U. S. – more guns than cars.



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