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EASTER GREETINGS OF HIS EXCELLENCY BISHOP PAUL CHOMNYCKY, OSBM, BISHOP OF STAMFORD

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Allow me to greet you on the occasion of the Feast of Feasts, the greatest of all Solemnities, the Day of the glorious Resurrection of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ from the dead. *Christ is Risen!*

The Evangelists, in their telling of the story of Pascha, begin, not with the joy of the Resurrection, but with the sadness of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene and the other myrrh-bearing women come, lamenting and sorrowful, early in the morning, to the grave of Jesus in order to anoint the body of their beloved teacher. Instead of Jesus' body, however, they discover an empty tomb. They are horrified and think that someone has stolen the body! Only then, do they hear the angel's announcement of Christ's Resurrection: "*He is not here for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay.*" (Mt. 28:6) Only then do they encounter the risen Christ and embrace him. We read: "*And suddenly, coming to meet them was Jesus....and the women came up to him and, clasping his feet, did him homage*" (Mt. 28:9) Only then, do they receive their commission from Jesus: "*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me.*" (Mt. 28:10)

So we see that first there is emptiness, then comes fulfillment. First there is sorrow, then comes joy. First there is death, then comes life. Pascha begins with nothing and ends with everything!

When we think about it, we can say that there is a tiny reflection of the Paschal story in each of our lives. Just as Pascha begins with emptiness so do our lives begin with emptiness. Before we take our first breath, we are called to leave the comfort of our mother's womb. And every day afterward in our life, every time we take a step forward, we are called to empty ourselves and leave something behind.

Emptiness is part of the human experience. Sometimes it can be seen as pain and loss, yet it can also be seen as a gift. We each need that emptiness in ourselves because it provides space that makes room for something new, a space that can be filled by God.

This year, our Easter celebrations may seem empty to us, because of the world-wide health crisis. Our civil authorities have mandated that, in order to help stem the spread of the coronavirus, we remain at home as much as possible and not gather in large groups. For the first time that any of us can remember, at least in this country, we have not been able to come together in our parish communities to pray, to sing and celebrate together the most important feast day of the liturgical year: the Resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ from the dead. And this makes us sad and depressed. There is an emptiness in our hearts.

But just as the myrrh-bearing women discovered, what started out as sorrow and emptiness, ended in joy and fulfillment. May it be so for us this year. May this unique Easter, this empty Easter, which we pray will never be repeated, provide us with an opportunity to truly meditate on the gift that Christ has given us with his suffering, death and resurrection. May the emptiness of our hearts be filled with Christ, our Lord, who broke down the doors of Hades and freed everyone, each one of us, from the bondage of sin and eternal death.

May this joy fill every emptiness and all that is lacking within us, may it wipe away all pain and fear, conquer every doubt and temptation, and remain with us forever!

We also pray that God remove the scourge of the Coronavirus from the face of the earth. We pray for repose of those who have succumbed to this vile disease, we pray for a speedy recovery of those who are ill. We pray for the first responders, the doctors, nurses, the chaplains and other health care professionals who risk their lives every day in order to serve their brothers and sisters in need. May our Risen Lord protect them all!

Let us take our example from the holy women who visited the tomb early on that first Easter morning. Let us embrace the Risen Christ who comes to fill our emptiness and let us with confidence and in the sureness of our faith, in word and deed, spread the Good News of his Resurrection in our world!

Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!