

EMPTY PROMISES

READING: *John chapter 19 verses 38 to chapter 20 verse 9*

INTRODUCTION

I have already alluded to the fact that Facebook seems to be full of messages bemoaning the fact that churches are empty at one of its busiest times of the year. Even the tradition of the Pope's Easter blessing, broadcast around the world, will be done very differently this year, because of the need for social distancing and self-isolation. The coronavirus has brought everything to a standstill – or has it? It may have brought free moving around to a virtual standstill – at least for those who adhere to the rules. It has brought to a standstill the ability of people who would normally gather together to celebrate the resurrection. But the coronavirus cannot thwart the free moving of God's Holy Spirit in this world. It may have emptied church buildings, but as we have already seen – WE are the church. The buildings may be empty, but the church of God, the Body of Christ is still alive and well – or at least I hope that it is!

None of us like to be on the receiving end of an empty promise. I am sure that each of us will have experienced it at sometime from those we know, but probably more so, from our politicians. At election time we have all heard those promises being made and once the elections are over, those promises dwindling into the mists of time, one by one. Life can be full of empty promises. We often hear, if something sounds too good to be true... it probably is. Marketing experts create commercials and advertisements that tell us that we can be happy, sexy, rich, or famous, if we only purchase a certain product. It doesn't take long before we have been fooled enough to know that the world's promises are full of emptiness.

Some people may wonder if the same is true of God. Our God is a God of promises. In fact, the Bible records over seven thousand promises from God to his people. We live in a world of broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. We make commitments and don't follow through. We make plans and promises that we never even intended to keep. Not God. God is different. On the first Easter Sunday, instead of promises full of emptiness, God gave us emptiness full of promise.

On this resurrection Sunday, I want us to think about the promises of Easter. For the convenience of preachers, there are at least three of them. Each promise is marked by something empty—an empty cross, empty clothes, and an empty cave. It is the very fact that each of these is empty that assures us that God's promises are not. First, let's examine the empty cross.

THE EMPTY CROSS

If you returned to the scene of Christ's execution that Sunday morning, you'd find relics of his death. A crown of thorns. Three iron nails covered in dirty and blood and an empty cross tinged red with the blood of God. To think that these nails held your sins to the cross? But that's what they did. Sin led Jesus to the cross. Not his accusers, or the chief priests, the anger of the crowd, or the betrayal of Judas. It was our sins. Every sin on your list comes with a price tag. A lifetime of sin is enough to rack up some major debt in heaven. Further and further in debt. Initially, we might try to repay what we owe. We figure our account balances as long as our good deeds outnumber our bad. But that isn't the way it works. The Bible tells us: ***"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6 verse 23)***. Putting it simply, the cost of our sins is more than we can pay. But the grace of God is more than we can imagine. Paul tells us what God has done with them: ***"You were dead in sins, and your sinful desires were not yet cut away. Then he gave you a share in the very life of Christ, for he forgave all your sins, and blotted out the charges proved against you, the list of his commandments which you had not obeyed. He took this list of sins and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross."*** (Colossians 3 verses 13-14)

The empty cross promises forgiveness. After six hours of agony upon the cross, Jesus whispered ***"It is finished!" (John 19 verse 30)***. Tom Wright in his commentary on *John 19 verse 30* states

that the words cried out by Jesus here is like an accounting term that means “paid in full.” When Jesus uttered those words, he wiped all the debt racked up by your sins and mine. He paid the debt that we could never pay. That’s why the empty cross promises forgiveness for all our sins. But that’s not all. Next, let’s examine the empty clothes.

THE EMPTY CLOTHES

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were both Pharisees who secretly believed in Jesus - secretly during Christ’s life, but bravely at his death. They requested permission from Pilate to bury the body of Jesus. They climbed Golgotha bearing burial clothes—long stripes of linen cloth. Permission was granted. Joseph supplied a tomb. Nicodemus supplied the spices. Then the Bible says, **“Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped Jesus’ body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth” (John 19 verse 40)**. For John, who witnessed all of this first hand, the arrival of the burial clothes represented hope disappearing. These linens were a tangible reminder that his faith and future were wrapped in cloth and sealed behind a rock.

John didn’t know on Friday what you and I know now. In fact, John would later confess that he and the others **“still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead” (John 20 verse 9)**. John and the others believed in Jesus. They put their faith in Jesus. All their hopes and their dreams rested in a man they believed was God in human flesh. But then He died. The ground beneath the cross was moist with blood. The body wrapped in strips of linen and laid to rest. All of Jesus’s followers were discouraged and disillusioned. Doubt was rife. Jesus’ death dealt a crushing blow to John’s faith.

Maybe you can relate to that. Things happen which cause us to doubt or waver. Maybe God didn’t “show up” when you thought he should have. When life gets hard or hopes are shattered, our faith can suffer a devastating blow. We begin to wonder why God lets bad things happen or if God’s even really there. What we learn from John, however, is to just hang in there a little while longer. We don’t know what John did on Saturday. We have no passage to read; no insights to share. All we know is—when Sunday came, John was still present.

What about you? When you’re in John’s position, what do you do? When you’re somewhere between yesterday’s tragedy and tomorrow’s triumph, what do you do? Do you leave God—or do you linger near him? John chose to stay near and because he lingered on Saturday, he was around to see the miracle on Sunday.

Very early on Sunday morning Mary busts through the door and delivered the news: “Jesus’s body is missing!” At first she thought Jesus’s enemies had taken his body away. Instantly Peter and John hurried to the tomb. John outran Peter and arrived first. What he saw so stunned him, he froze at the entrance. What did he see? **“He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there... while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings” (John 20 verses 5-7)**.

John’s mind began to race. If someone had stolen the body, he must have thought, wouldn’t they have taken the grave clothes too? Why waste time unwrapping a body only to steal it? He knew there was only one answer. The Bible says, **“He saw and believed” (John 20 verse 8)**. The empty clothes promise faith. On the first Easter Sunday, God took burial clothing—a tangible reminder of Jesus’s death, a symbol of tragedy—and made it a symbol of hope, a birthplace of faith. A pile of empty clothes restored John’s faith. God wants to do the same for us. The next time your faith is shaken, when doubts or fears well up inside, remember the empty clothes. Don’t leave God. Linger near him. You might just be one day away from a miracle. For John, the empty clothes were proof positive that Jesus had risen and because of that John’s faith was renewed and restored. Yours can be too.

Finally, we come to empty tomb itself.

THE EMPTY CAVE

The tomb in which Jesus was laid to rest belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. It was a newly carved crypt cut into the side of a rock wall— basically a man-made cave with rock slab benches inside. After Peter and John discovered the empty clothes, they returned to town. But Mary and some of Jesus's female followers lingered at the empty tomb. Suddenly angels appeared to them and announced, ***"Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus, who has been crucified. He is not here. He has risen from the dead as he said he would. Come and see the place where his body was!"*** (Matthew 28 verses 5-6).

The tomb of Jesus remained empty as a symbol of life that outlasts the grave—life everlasting. In other words, the empty cave promises forever. Our minds can hardly grasp the concept, yet Jesus promised it over and over. He told Nicodemus, ***"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"*** (John 3 verse 16). He assured the woman at the well, ***"those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life"*** (John 4 verse 14). He announced to the crowds, ***"For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life. I will raise them up at the last day"*** (John 6 verse 47).

Most people today hope for a long and happy life, but Jesus offers so much more. He offers eternity. The promise of eternal life is the heartbeat of hope. It's what we, as Christians, long for and look forward to. As we grow to feel more and more in life the limitations of 24 hours and the limitations of a seven-day week, and the limitations of a month and the fact that there are only 12 months in a year through which to distribute the demands being made upon our time, we should marvel at the gift God has promised us. Because of his promise of eternal life we have an unshakable hope — we are heading for forever!

The apostle Paul put it this way: ***"And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him. When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God."*** (Romans 6 verses 8-10)

The empty tomb serves as a powerful reminder that Christ rose from the grave, never to die again. He promises that if we believe in him, then we will live with him... forever! As that final verse of Amazing Grace reminds us: "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days to sing his praise than when we first begun."

CONCLUSION

The empty cross promises forgiveness for all our sins.

The empty clothes promise faith for those who stay close to God during those dark days.

The empty tomb promises forever to those who put their faith in the One who conquered death.

Our God is a God of promises. He always keeps them! The very fact that the cross, the clothes, and the tomb were found empty assures us that God's promises are not! Those empty promises of Easter provide for us a "full salvation".