

Brentview Baptist Church
An 'Empty' Celebration
(Matthew 28:1-10)



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Imagine with me, 'A group of Jesus followers meeting, back in the upper room, on the 1st anniversary of that glorious first Easter Morning. In the middle of the room sat a table around which Mary Magdalene, Peter, John and the other disciples sat. The room was crowded, as people leaned forward to hear what was being said around the table. Peter, of course was the first to speak, he always was. He cleared his throat and said 'this year has been an incredible year, do you remember how so many of us saw Jesus after he rose from the dead? Do you remember what it was like to see Jesus walk through that very door (that was locked) and say "peace be with you"? Do you remember the 1000's who we baptized on that first Pentecost morning, who then took Jesus' story around the world? Do you remember seeing people healed, their lives transformed and witnessing the power of the Resurrected Jesus touching your lives and the lives of your friends? Today we are meeting one year after the greatest day in history.' Then Peter would have laughed, for he said "All this 'to do' is about Nothing, or more specifically, it is an empty celebration/a celebration of empty things, it is about an empty cross, an empty tomb and an empty napkin.' The wonderful thing is that Jesus never made a promise that he didn't make good on, and that was especially true concerning the resurrection. *Matthew 16:21* From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. *Mark 9:31* 'For He taught His disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day' (13 times in the New Testament this promise is made). For despite the fact that I didn't get it, that none of us got it, Jesus has told us again and again that he would rise from the dead, because He was God who had been living among us. Today everyone in this room knows that He kept his promise, and is exactly who he said he was. Then Peter would have said with a sigh 'can I remind you of the..

1. Empty Cross

Peter continued... you know that I was there outside Caiaphas' court when Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, and it was there that I denied even knowing Jesus at all. My words still echo in my mind and I can't even begin to tell you how guilty I feel over what I did that night. I was also there in the crowd as Pilate questioned Jesus and had him flogged. You won't believe it, but as I sat there listening as Jesus refused to answer Pilate's questions, I was thinking (and you will love this) Jesus goes for a plea bargain, admit something/admit anything so you can sidestep the cross.' Peter then turned with a smile and said 'just think how different things would have been if Jesus had gone for a plea bargain instead of the cross, and had received 5 to 10 years with good behavior". Our lives, our eternities would be radically different.

Then there was the morning I climbed the hill that overlooked Golgotha. As the sun rose that morning silhouetted against the skyline still stood those 3 crosses. I couldn't pull my gaze away from the crosses, especially the middle one that I knew was stained with the blood of my friend Jesus. I remember hearing the night before from John that something had happened on the cross, beyond what could be seen with the visible eye. For when that eerie darkness fell across the cross, John said a new agony invaded the darkness. Jesus acted as if the sin of the world, the hurt of my denial washed over him like a cesspool of filth.' Jesus cried out "My God my God why have you forsaken me". Notice he didn't say 'why does it feel like God has forsaken me' but that God actually had to turn away because of what had just slimmed Jesus' very soul.

Last week as we listened to that amazing Handel's Messiah part 2, what made the presentation even more profound was that the words from *Isaiah 53* were projected on the wall as the choir sang. Pat Wright said he had heard the Messiah many times before but seeing the words on the wall moved him to tears. Handel, with the way he put the music together with the texts, keeps repeating certain phrases, keeps circling back to specific words so they will take root in our souls. *Isaiah 53* says 'Surely He bore our grief's', surely as Peter thought of his sin of denying Jesus that denial broke Jesus' heart. Surely those secret things we play with at times in our minds broke Jesus' heart as he borne them. Surely that hurtful action toward a loved one, that friend we let down, our anger that wounded our child, surely as

Jesus bore them, it broke his heart. It is even more understandable when you consider as in *Isaiah 53:6* that we keep going astray like lost sheep, despite all that he has done for us. And yet, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of the world.

'Kay Arthur' a Christian author wrote this, 'Many years ago while in my 20's I was so far away from God he couldn't possibly get to me. She was living with her husband who was manic depressive and just got tired of living with him. So she had an affair with a married man. When her husband found out he threatened suicide. Her response to him was "go ahead and kill yourself, I could use the insurance money". With that, he hung himself. She said as she drove away from the cemetery feeling so guilty, so angry and in such pain that she raised her fist to the sky and said 'to hell with God'. She writes 'what I didn't know was that was exactly what he did for me'. He gave his life, he went to the very gates of hell, and he did it for me'.

Peter would have continued with tears in his eyes, you know as I look back at that memory of the empty cross against the sunrise that morning, I realize that the empty cross is filled with the promise of forgiveness. For, it not only proved that Jesus love's us enough to give his life for us, but it proved the job was done, our sins are forgiven, and paid for. Peter would have added 'because the Cross is empty, we know our sins are gone, because the Cross was empty, we have the promise of forgiveness.'

2. An Empty Tomb

That is when Mary Magdalene would have spoken up. She would have said "I can still remember coming over the hill and walking toward the tomb that first Easter Sunday. We had been so concerned about how we would get past the guards and into the tomb that had been sealed with Pilate's government seal. But as we walked up to the tomb the sight we saw was amazing, Soldiers walking around like they had been struck by some powerful force, the 2 ton bolder that had covered the tombs entrance was 10 feet away with huge cracks running down it. And there sitting on the stone, were 2 angels glowing in white.' One spoke up and said 'Don't be afraid for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said'. 'My mind went into slow motion as I began to play back Jesus' words, and I remembered that there were numerous times he had made a statement that we didn't understand, the Angel was right, Jesus said he would rise from the dead, and here we stand amidst stunned soldiers, a thrown boulder and 2 angels and everything Jesus said has come true. Then the angel waved us forward and said 'come and see the place where he lay,' we stuck our heads into the tomb and sure enough it was empty, then he added 'now go quickly and tell his disciples He has risen from the dead' (*Matthew 28:1-7*). No matter how often those words play through my head I will never lose the wonder, and the excitement they bring to my soul. He has been raised from the dead, I can testify that he has risen, he has risen indeed".

What is the significance of the empty tomb? That Jesus kept his promise; he has risen from the dead. It also means that Jesus was able to do what no other person has ever done, and that is walk right through death and back into life itself. Before the resurrection, the grave was looked upon as the final chapter, the closing of a great door, a farewell with no chance of reunions and the end to everything. Now the grave is seen as a thoroughfare for the Christians, a saying good bye for a short time. Jesus broke the sound barrier of death, there will be a time when all of us will rise into the sky and death that steals so much from us will be proved to only delay wonderful reunions with those we love. While death still stings it no longer kills.

When I read the passage 'Where oh death is your sting" I always think of the story of a dad who was riding in the car with his daughter who had a deadly allergy to bee stings. One afternoon as they were driving along a bee flew into the car and immediately the daughter began to scream for she knew one sting could end her life. They tried to chase the bee out of the window they had opened but when they couldn't, her dad made a grab for the bee, held it for a moment before it slipped out of his hand again. When the daughter saw the bee she began to scream again. Until her father opened his hand showing the bee stinger embedded deep in his palm. And said 'don't worry I have taken the sting out of him, you are now safe". The empty tomb is God's evidence to us that he has taken the sting out of death. On one side of the resurrection everything seems temporary, whole on the other side, everything is

eternal. That is because he rose again, and so will we. Because the tomb is empty, our tomb will someday be empty as well. Because the tomb is empty, we have the promise of eternal life.

3. The Empty Napkin

Then the eyes would have turned to John, for he had been the one who had been brave enough to stand at the cross with Jesus, and everyone knew he could verify Peter and Mary's words about the tomb, for he had been there as well. He simply picked up a napkin from the table, folded it gently and placed it back on the table. Then he added, 'that is what the napkin which had been wrapped around Jesus' face looked like when I entered the tomb. When I saw it lying beside the other grave clothes my first thought was that if I was going to steal the body of Jesus, I don't think I would strip him naked and uncover his face before I left the tomb with the body. For, it would be a waste of time and could make it easier for people to identify the body as I carried it away.' My second thought, was what Jesus had taught us (later Paul wrote it down) that in the twinkling of an eye we shall all be changed, we who are mortal will put on immortality. Jesus no longer needed earthly clothes for he had put his 'God clothes' back on again. Then I remembered the Passover meal I had shared growing up with my family and even the last Supper we had with Jesus. And I remember that in our tradition, when my dad was finished eating, he simply left his crumpled napkin on the table. But if he was going to leave for a short time and then come back for dessert he would carefully fold his napkin and place it beside the plate. Then everyone knew he was coming back soon. When I saw the napkin folded so carefully, the exact way Jesus always had done, I knew that with a smile, Jesus had left us a sign. It was that he was just leaving for a short while and he would be returning soon. It thrilled my heart and that is why when Jesus appeared in the upper room and later in Galilee, I wasn't surprised, for he was just keeping his promise. Because the napkin was empty, we know he rose from the grave and is alive.' Because the napkin was empty, we know he can walk back into our lives.

If you have traveled in the States I am sure you have come across an upscale clothing store called Nordstrom's. A pastor named Steve Kellett bought an expensive navy blazer from Nordstrom's but the more he wore it the less he liked it. It didn't feel good and it seemed to collect lint like a vacuum. After wearing it for 6 months fairly regularly, he stuck it in his closet and left it there. Then one day he remembered that Nordstrom's has an unconditional return policy. So with nothing to lose, he pulled it out of his closet and headed back to the store. As he entered the store he walked up to the first salesman he saw and said 'I am about to put your unconditional guarantee to the test. I have a blazer, I've worn it lots, I've had it for 1 ½ years, I don't like it, it is the wrong color and it attracts lint like a vacuum. So I want to return it and get another one. Steve, swallowed twice, and said 'the man with a big handle bar mustache just looked at me, shook his head and said 'what took you so long, let's go and get you another blazer'. Ten minutes later I walked out with a new blazer that was marked \$75.00 more than I had paid for on my old blazer. It was perfect and didn't cost me a penny.' Remember how we began today? The wonderful thing is that Jesus never made a promise that he didn't go back good on. *Matthew 16:21* From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. He said he would rise again and by keeping his promise Jesus changed everything.

Easter tells us that... The Cross couldn't hold him. The Tomb couldn't contain him. The burial clothes became unnecessary, because Jesus is alive. His promise to us is... Because the Cross was empty, we have the promise of forgiveness. Because the tomb is empty, we have the promise of eternal life. And because the napkin was empty, we know he can walk back into our lives