

A BEAUTIFUL EMPTINESS

Mark 16:1-8

The empty tomb fills our hearts with joy and our deaths with eternity.

A sermon preached by
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I'm not an expert on art. I enjoy going to art museums, and I can see beauty in all kinds of art. It amazes me how the creative mind works and how artists can do the things they do.

I was reading an article about Oriental art. If you have ever noticed, Oriental art and architecture sometimes have a great deal of empty space in them—blank spots in the picture or very simple structures. The writer explained that an Oriental artist usually spends more time and attention allocating the empty space than to making the actual design. The empty space gives the harmony and tranquility that is so characteristic of Oriental art.

One of the most famous examples of harmonic emptiness is a Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan, known as Ryoan-ji. Thousands of people visit the temple each year to see its garden, which is nothing but a broad expanse of white pebbles marked here and there by a rock that juts up out of the ground. To the Western eye, it doesn't look like much, but the people stand there and meditate on the empty garden for hours. To the Asian mind, emptiness is more than nothing; emptiness is full of value.¹

Did it ever seem odd to you that the reason we are here today is empty? The first sign of the resurrection is a hole in the ground, hollowed out of the soft limestone of Jerusalem. The centerpoint of our faith is nothing, or rather the absence of something. It's empty!

It's odd because we prefer the important things in our lives to be full. We want our bank accounts full. We want our bellies full. We want our senses full of stimulation and information 24/7/365. Our houses and storage buildings are crammed full of stuff. We don't want to be empty.

But here we are. It's early in the morning, dawn's first light. Jesus had been dead since Friday afternoon. The sorrowful women came to the tomb to anoint the body with spices because that's the way the Jews did it. They were worried because they had seen the stone that was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. Somebody was going to have to roll it back.

Then they saw that the stone had been rolled back; the tomb was open. They went inside, and there was a young man dressed in a white robe. (The other gospels say an angel or two.) The young man said the words that changed the history of the world, "*Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.*"² The tomb was empty! Some folded grave clothes marked the spot where Jesus was laid.

The emptiness of Easter actually began long before that amazing, scary, confusing morning. Last week we read in Philippians how Jesus had chosen to empty himself of his heavenly status and glory to take on human flesh. Becoming incarnate as a human being, born as a baby in Bethlehem, he gave up his divine place and entered a human body as limited in every way as we are: "*Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*"³

The self-emptying of Jesus continued, until in obedience to his Father, he gave his life for your sins and mine: "*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*"⁴ Jesus emptied himself until even the water and the blood that sustained his life flowed into the ground around Calvary.

Come to think of it, emptiness is probably a good way to describe how the women were feeling who came to the tomb early on that Sunday morning. They had watched as Jesus was mocked and condemned and beaten. They saw him die after several hours of torturous pain on the cross. Their hearts were broken by the pain of grief. When the stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb, the door slammed shut on their hopes, their dreams, their vision for a new Kingdom of God that Jesus would bring. They were exhausted, depleted, and empty.

But that is exactly when emptiness took on a new meaning for them. In the dim light of dawn, they discovered the empty tomb. At first it was frightening, but then the realization began to dawn on them. Jesus was alive! He had risen, as he said he would! The words of the angel confirmed the idea exploding in their brains, "He is not here. See the place where they laid him. It's empty."

I would have choreographed the resurrection differently myself. I would have had about a thousand trumpets blast out the news as soon as the sun peaked over the Judean horizon. I would have had about 6 million angels in a choir singing the "Hallelujah Chorus." Everybody in Jerusalem, including Pilate and

the chief priests, would have jumped out of bed to see Jesus alive, dressed in a brilliant robe, flying in the air over Jerusalem. It would have been a full-scale Hollywood production!

But that's not God's way, is it? A quiet dawn, a trio of red-eyed women, an angel or two, and a stark, bare, empty tomb—this is our first glimpse of the New Age. It's a strange way to change the world. But when I reflect on the ways of God, I find it oddly compelling and supremely meaningful.

I think the Easter story is telling us that in the empty times of our lives, we can be filled with the power of the empty tomb. When our hearts are breaking, when we are faced with the hard and tragic times of our lives, we can remember the empty tomb and hear the good news of Easter. Jesus defeated evil, sin, and death; so whatever valley we walk through, resurrection is always a possibility. God can bring good out of evil, fullness out of emptiness, and hope out of whatever trial we face.

God understands our suffering. The story of God's people includes slavery, exile in a foreign land, oppression, persecution, martyrdom—it's never been easy. God's own Son had to suffer and die on the cross; I think God gets the human condition.

Paul says, *"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*⁵ When we confront our own personal tragedies, hardships, trouble, and despair, we can depend on the God who brought us Easter.

You would think that Rick Warren, founding pastor of a megachurch and best-selling author, would be above suffering. But he and his wife Kay went through a devastating loss when their twenty-seven-year-old son Matthew took his own life after battling depression and mental illness for years.

About a year after this tragedy, Rick said, "I've often been asked, 'How have you made it? How have you kept going in your pain?' And I've often replied, 'The answer is Easter.'

"You see, the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus happened over three days. Friday was the day of suffering and pain and agony. Saturday was the day of doubt and confusion and misery. But Easter—that Sunday—was the day of hope and joy and victory.

"And here's the fact of life: you will face these three days over and over and over in your lifetime. And when you do, you'll find yourself asking—as I did—three fundamental questions. Number one, 'What do I do in my days of pain?' Two, 'How do I get through my days of doubt and confusion?' Three, 'How do I get to the days of joy and victory?'

"The answer is Easter. The answer ... is Easter."⁶

The Easter story is powerful because it leads us to eternal life. The empty tomb means we can have a life that is more full than any life ever could be on earth. Despite our sufferings in this present time, we know we have a life in God through Jesus Christ that is full and glorious and heavenly and eternal. Easter is the entry point to that promise.

One of the most beautiful stories that I have told on several Easters is about an eight-year-old boy named Stephen. He suffered from a progressive and incurable brain disorder. His Sunday School teacher noticed the deterioration in his mental abilities, and she wondered if the other children would treat Stephen any differently as his disease got worse.

One Palm Sunday, the teacher brought oversized plastic eggs to the eight children in her class. She told them to bring the eggs back on Easter with some symbol of new life in the egg. They would show and tell their classmates what they found.

On Easter morning, each child, including Stephen, had brought their eggs back. Not wanting to embarrass Stephen in case he hadn't caught on, the teacher opened the eggs for the kids. The first one held a tiny flower. The teacher said, "What a lovely sign of new life!" And the kid who brought it shouted, "That one's mine!"

The next egg had a rock in it. The teacher thought maybe that was Stephen's, since rocks don't mean new life. But one of the boys pointed out that he had brought the rock, and it had moss on it, so that was new life. Good enough.

The third egg opened, and a butterfly flew out. The smartest girl in the class said her symbol of new life was the best one of all, as she always did.

The teacher opened the fourth egg, and it was empty. She knew this one must be Stephen's, so she reached for a fifth egg. Stephen said, "That's mine. Please don't skip it."

"But it's empty," the teacher said.

"I know," Stephen said. "Like the tomb was empty, and that's new life for everyone." Stephen understood.

That Easter was Stephen's last time in Sunday School. The next week he entered the hospital, and in May he died. At his funeral, his family entered the church and saw a strange sight. On top of the casket, there were eight oversized plastic eggs, placed there by the members of Stephen's Sunday School class. Each of them was open, but this time, each of them was empty.

The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise.⁷ The world promises to fill the gaping wound in our soul with stuff that is selfish, false, and temporary—and ultimately empty. The empty cross, empty tomb, empty grave-clothes are full of promises that are real and true and eternal. God fills our empty places with God's fullness and conquers our deaths for all eternity. How can we respond to this awesome news?

We can empty ourselves of the sin that separates us from God, the selfishness, the pride, the prejudice—all those things that are ungodly or un-Christlike. I saw somebody at lunch Thursday who had been to Harry Shipley's funeral, and we were talking about what a meaningful celebration of life it was. She told me she was walking out of the church and ran into a friend who said, "After that service, I'm going to have to live my life *righter!*" That's a step, to empty ourselves of everything that keeps us from being what God wants us to be and to live our lives "righter."

Then we can fill our lives with all the good things of God. The tomb is empty because God wants us to have life in all its abundance. Emptied of sin, we can fill our lives with the practices of discipleship, the means of grace, the joy of Easter, the power of the resurrection, the hope of eternal life.

Then, being filled with the good things of God, we can empty ourselves again in service to God's Kingdom. Serving a God who gave everything for us, we can give ourselves in ministry to the world Jesus died and rose to save. The truth is, the more we empty ourselves, the more God will fill us up, until our cup of blessing overflows.

I can't prove Easter happened; I can only invite you into the experience. There is certainly historical evidence that Easter is real, but we really don't have conclusive scientific proof. Dr. Joshua Swamidass is a physician, a scientist, and a professor in the medical school at Washington University in Saint Louis. He's also a Christian. He recently wrote an essay about the evidence for the resurrection. He said, "I am a scientist. Still, on Easter, I celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead about 2,000 years ago. This event, in first-century Palestine, is the cornerstone of everything. In the same way that trust-like faith in science is connected to evidence, so is the faith I have in the Resurrection."

He then discusses several arguments that point to the reality of the resurrection. (I'll footnote his essay in the printed sermon.) Although he believes in reasonable evidence, Swamidass finally comes to this conclusion: "The question of the resurrection is more like an opportunity to fall in love than a scientific inquiry. There is evidence, but the resurrection cannot be studied dispassionately. If Jesus really rose from the dead, it reorders everything. Just like falling in love, it changes our view of the world."⁸

I want to invite you to fall in love today, maybe for the first time, or to rekindle a love that has meant so much to you in the past. I want to invite you to fall in love with the risen Christ, to fall in love with the story of Easter, to fall in love with the beautiful emptiness that makes us full.

The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! Thanks be to God!

¹ Jung Young Lee, *Sermons to the 12* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1988).

² Mark 16:6.

³ Philippians 2:6-7.

⁴ Philippians 2:8.

⁵ Romans 8:31-32, 35, 37, 39.

⁶ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Hope* (Zondervan, 2015), pp. 56-57.

⁷ Carolyn Arends, "What's So Good About Good Friday?" *Kyria.com* (4-10-09).

⁸S. Joshua Swamidass, "Is There Evidence for Easter? A Scientist's List," *The Veritas Forum* (4-15-17).