

“THE BEST WORD TO DESCRIBE EASTER . . .”

Christ Is Risen! He Is Risen Indeed! Alleluia.

Dear Friends in Christ and Celebrants of the Empty Tomb,

Today's the day! This is it for believers in Christ. Today is the high point of our church year. Today is the day we celebrate the culmination of the most important 3 days in the history of the world. From today's Gospel lesson (Luke 24:1-12) we listen again to these verses:

¹ . . . very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus had been brutally executed. He was dead on Friday. But he was alive on Sunday. Friday, Saturday, Sunday the most important 3 days in the history of the world. And today I'm going to tell you, in a word, why those 3 days are the most important days in the history of the world . . . for you.

If you had to choose one word to describe Easter, what would it be?

If I were to ask this question to the world around us, the best word to describe Easter might be 'bunny' - the Easter Bunny, or 'egg' - Easter eggs, or 'basket' - Easter basket, or 'candy' - Easter candy. Each one of those words certainly bring to mind the Easter that the world around us knows and celebrates.

But what about you? If you had to choose one word to describe Easter, what would it be? Would you choose 'resurrection' - being restored to life? Or would you choose the word 'alleluia' - praise the Lord? Some of you might choose the word 'victory' because, in a word, it describes the result, the conclusion of the events that occurred during the most important 3 days in the history of the world.

Those are all, arguably, good choices, but this morning I'm going to propose another word. If I had to choose one word to describe Easter, I would choose the word empty . . . **EMPTY** - E-M-P-T-Y - **EMPTY** without contents, vacant, containing nothing. **Empty** describes not only the reason for our Easter joy, but also God's final plan for you and me and all believers.

Verse 1 tells us, *¹ . . . very early in the morning, the women . . . went to the tomb.* Their walk in the early morning light took them past the place of execution, Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. The Romans' horrid mechanisms of execution, the crosses, were still standing in place, ready for the next batch of condemned criminals. But here's the fact that is important for you and me. The cross on which Jesus hung was **empty**, and you know why. The cross had accomplished its purpose, the tortuous, agonizing execution of Jesus from Nazareth.

This was a professional execution carried out by cruel, ruthless, heartless Roman soldiers. They were seasoned pros when it came to death. They knew how to take someone's life while inflicting the greatest pain possible. And, they were ordered, they were commanded, to make sure that each of the three condemned men was actually dead. If they failed to carry out this order, they faced severe punishment themselves, up to and including their own execution. The cross was **empty** because Jesus was dead, not unconscious, not drugged, not in a coma, but dead. The spear, plunged into his side, confirmed his death.

But the death Jesus suffered was more than merely physical pain and torture. Jesus suffered the harsh blows of a holy God's hatred for sin and a holy God's punishment of sin. Jesus, who had no sin in himself, took our sin on himself so he might pay the penalty for our sins and bestow his righteousness, his sinlessness on us. By means of the cross, God punished the world's sin in the body of his own Son. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV) *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us . . .* Jesus became the very embodiment of sin, as he hung on the cross, and God exacted the death penalty on Jesus that you and I deserve for our sins.

The cross was **empty** because by three o'clock in the afternoon of Good Friday, the body of Jesus was **empty**, empty of its soul. It was dead and lifeless. The dead and lifeless body of Jesus was hurriedly placed in a tomb, a shallow cave that had recently been carved into side of a rocky hill, and there it lay - Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

We read: ¹ *On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.* ² *They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,* ³ *but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.* **Empty** not only describes the cross of Christ. **Empty** describes the tomb of Christ. **Empty**, vacant, devoid of contents. The body of Jesus was gone! In one of the most clearly attested facts of history, the grave of Jesus was **empty** on Easter morning.

Matthew's gospel tells us that the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, had his Roman soldiers secure the tomb by putting a seal on the stone and posting a guard. (Matthew 27:65-66). Early Easter morning, there was a violent earthquake. An angel, with an "*appearance like lightening*" and "*clothes as white as snow*" came down, rolled back the stone and sat on it. *The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.* (Matthew 28:4 NIV). They fainted.

When they recovered, the guards saw the **empty** tomb and ran into the city and reported to their commanding officer . . .? No, they reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. They didn't dare go to their commanding officer. It was an offense punishable by death when the person or object a Roman soldier was guarding was lost or stolen on their watch. ¹² . . . *the chief priests . . . gave the soldiers a large sum of money,* ¹³ *telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'* ¹⁴ *If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* ¹⁵ *So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed . . .* Matthew 28:12-15 (NIV). The chief priests had to bribe the soldiers. They had to make up a story of body-snatching disciples. They had to come up with some explanation, because of the fact that the tomb was **empty**, devoid of contents.

You know why the tomb was **empty**. Jesus Christ, dead on Good Friday, was alive on Easter Sunday, resurrected, raised from the dead. This was God's stamp of approval on the saving work of Jesus. This was God's way of saying, "I accept the death of my Son as payment for sin." The **empty** tomb means your faith in Jesus as your Savior is not a hollow sentiment or a wishful thought. Your faith in Jesus is built on the fact of the **empty** tomb. As a result, you are no longer trapped in your sins. You have forgiveness for all your sins through faith in Jesus. When Christ died and rose from the grave, he put the grave behind him, and heaven in front of you.

Empty cross, **empty** tomb, yes, **empty** is the operative word for Easter Sunday. And **empty** describes something more. It describes that spot in hell that Satan prepared for you the moment you were born. You and I were born "*dead in our transgressions and sins.*" "*Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*" (Ephesians 2:1-3 NIV). The devil was ready to have you spend an eternity with him in torment. He was gleefully counting you among the lost, a future inhabitant of hell, until the Holy Spirit came and worked faith in your heart. Now that spot is **empty**. It will remain **empty** as long

as you remain in the faith, a believer in Jesus, the Risen and Triumphant conqueror of death and the devil.

Throughout Scripture we read about the devastating effects of sin. Sin can separate us from God. (Isaiah 59:2). A day of reckoning is at hand for those whose sins are many. (Hosea 9:7). The psalmist asks, *"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"* (Psalm 130:3 NIV). In the visionary language of Revelation, the Apostle John refers to such a record of sins. Revelation 20:12 *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.* (NIV).

If you could get a look at your individual page (or pages) in the 'record of sins,' do you know what you would see? You would see nothing. The page is **empty**. . . . *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.* (1 John 1:7 NIV). As a believer in the Risen Savior you are clothed in his perfection, his sinlessness, his righteousness. This righteousness comes to you through faith. (Romans 4:5,13 NIV). Every one of your sins is forgiven, washed away in the blood of Christ. That's why your page in the 'record of sins' is **empty**.

And that little word **empty** contains a beautiful promise for you. You know that at the moment of death, your soul will leave your body. Your body will be just an **empty** shell that you leave behind. As you enjoy the bliss of heaven, your **empty** shell of a body will be laid to rest in its grave or the cremated remains of your **empty** shell of a body will be placed in an urn. But the **empty** shell of your body will not stay in its resting place forever. On Judgment Day, every grave will give up its body, every urn will give up its contents. Your body will be raised to life, re-joined with your soul and be glorified. Together, soul and body, you will go to live with the Lord forever, leaving behind an **empty** urn, an **empty** grave. And leaving behind death, a defeated foe. Jesus says this is absolutely certain for all who believe in him. *Because I live, you also will live.* John 14:19 (NIV). Jesus is the "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep. What happened to Jesus will happen to you and all believers in Jesus. The glorious fact of the **empty** tomb reminds us that as his body was raised from death and glorified, so also will your body be raised from death and glorified.

But the word **empty** can also picture something from which we are set free by the work of Jesus. We read in 1 Peter 1:18-19 (NIV) ¹⁸ *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the **empty** way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,* ¹⁹ *but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.* You and I have been purchased from the **empty** way of life of the world around us.

Perhaps you know people whose lives are **empty**, unbelievers. Without a knowledge of God's plan for their salvation, they are adrift in this life. Without guidance from God's word, they're in the ultimately uncomfortable position of making their own rules and deciding for themselves what's right and what's wrong. It's an **empty** life because they have no answers to the big questions of life. Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What awaits me when I die? The devil is gleefully reserving their place in hell, and that's where they're headed without faith in Jesus. Their pages in the 'record of sins' are full from top to bottom and margin to margin. Without faith in Jesus their sins testify against them. They need to learn about Jesus.

The precious blood of Christ has paid for your way out of the **empty** life into a life that is full. Jesus himself said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10 NIV). As a believer in the Risen Savior, you can live a life that is full, loving God with all your heart, loving your neighbor as yourself, and showing thanks to God by living according to his Word. That's how to get the most out of this life. That's how to witness to those whose lives are empty.

The cross is **empty**. The tomb is **empty**. Your spot in hell is **empty**. Your page in the record of sins is **empty**. Someday your grave will be **empty** too. Knowing that, you can be FULL today. Full of joy and gladness as you live for him. Full of hope in the face of death.

Christ Is Risen! He Is Risen Indeed! Amen.