

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017 on Matthew 28:1-10 and Psalm 16:11 at Victory of the Lamb.

**Series: Empty**  
**Today's Focus: Empty Tomb**

**"No Empty Promises Here!"**

In the name of Jesus Christ who said, *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades"* (Revelation 1:17-18). We read from the sacred New Testament text recorded in the gospel of Matthew...

**After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.**

**<sup>2</sup>There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.**

**<sup>5</sup>The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."**

**<sup>8</sup>So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.**

**<sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."**



How do you feel when you're driving and you see this symbol pop up on your dashboard? {pic} Does it make you anxious? Do you think, "I need to stop at the next gas station I see!?" Or maybe some of you can't even remember the last time you saw that little symbol because you don't ever let that little needle dip below ¼ of a tank!

Any of you super cautious like that? But are there any of you here who see that low fuel indicator and you get a little crazy? Do you ever think, "Ooh...I wonder how far I can go yet!?" I'm generally not one of those kind of people in case you're wondering! But here's the thing. Eventually, if you don't fill up...you will run out of gas. Your vehicle can't go on with an empty tank.

What about you with an empty promise? How long can one go on when the empty promise indicator starts making an appearance in their life? A marriage vow broken through unfaithfulness or abuse. A happy family gathering that never comes to fruition or falls apart when it does. A promotion that goes poof even after all you've done and sacrificed. A deal that goes south despite what you were led to believe. A parent who says, "I'll be there, kids" but never seems to show up when it counts. A politician who promises his or her policies will make everything better than the last. A cure for a disease that comes up short, far too short. How long can a person be fueled by what seems sometimes to be a world full of so many empty promises?

Did you know that the Bible often uses the word “empty” to mean the same thing as “in vain”— something that is useless? How much of life often seems to be lived in vain, full of empty promises? If you’ve ever felt this in your life then understand...this is how the women probably felt on that first Easter Sunday morning. I mean they’d followed Jesus for three years. They’d seen the miracles he performed. They saw the crowds swell. They witnessed the deepest hopes and dreams of really desperate people become reality. Their own empty hearts were being filled with God’s messianic promises which they believed they were seeing fulfilled right before their eyes.

But now on this Sunday morning, they were still trying to come to grips with what must have seemed like an empty promise. For they had been there on Good Friday at that skull shaped hill called Golgotha. There they saw Jesus nailed to that cross, utterly humiliated, brutalized, and scorned. What loyalty and love they displayed as they remained there while Jesus died and then as the Roman executioners plunged a spear through his lifeless heart just to make sure. From Golgotha they followed to a garden where a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea and, of all people, a Pharisee named Nicodemus lovingly laid Jesus’ body to rest in a tomb hewn out of rock. There they observed the heavy stone that was rolled into the slot to bar the door. They saw the seal that was placed to make it secure. They likely knew that a detachment of soldiers was assigned to guard it carefully.

So on this sad Easter Sunday morning they knew where to go to have a look at that garden tomb. But they were feeling empty going there. How long could they go on feeling like that? Would their trip to the tomb be one more thing they did in vain, an empty effort to find some sense of closure for so many empty promises? They expected to find a sealed tomb with a corpse inside.

Except when they got there, what did they find? They didn’t find a sealed tomb. And they didn’t find it full of a dead body. Instead they found an open door, an empty tomb, and a shining angel of God sent there to deliver a message from heaven! They found at this empty tomb that the only things that proved useless were the stone, the seal, and the detachment of soldiers. What proved in vain was death’s cold grip on the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life himself! For the tomb was undeniably, wonderfully empty, opened by an angel...not of course to let Jesus out but to let the women in so that you and me and all the world could see that there are no empty promises here! <sup>5</sup> **The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.**

But let’s pause for a moment and consider, “What if the tomb wasn’t empty?” What if inside remained the lifeless corpse of Jesus who once acknowledged under oath that he was the Son of God? What would that mean? For one thing it would mean I’m a fool. And Pastor Bill is a fool. And maybe you’re thinking, “Well, we sort of knew that about you two goofballs anyway.” But then what would it say about you who are here? I mean why are you here? To get a pep-talk? There are podcasts and TED talks for that you know. There are life coaches and self-help blogs. There’s Dr. Phil and Oprah. There’s Comedy Central. There are park and rec programs. There are pills you can take. Because if the tomb wasn’t empty, then faith in a God who has a Grand Master Plan, is just a placebo. A scam. Fake news.

Something I appreciate about the Bible is its authentic honesty about this and, as you get to know it, everything else. There’s a verse that says, **“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”** (1 Corinthians 15:14). You see that word “useless”... you know what the Greek word is there? *Empty*. In vain. If Christ has not been raised, then my preaching, your faith, and your

presence here today is a waste of time. Moreover, if the tomb isn't empty, then all God's so-called promises are empty too.

But let's unpack this a little bit more. Because some people might say, some of you maybe might be tempted to think, "Well, so what? What's the big deal? If God's not real, just get over it already. Do whatever makes you feel happy. Don't worry about a thing. Follow your heart. Find some cause to devote yourself too. Do good to others and this will help you feel good. So let's go home and get on with enjoying with living in the *now* if there is no God."

Except stop for a second. Do you see how empty this kind of thinking really is? Because if the atheist's worldview is right...and there is no God...then gone is any meaningful purpose. Gone is morality. So, "follow your heart" .....well who's to say it matters whether your heart leads you to be a great humanitarian or someone more like Hitler??? Gone is any hope for life after death. Because now all you've really got is survival of the fittest. And who are you to say that anything is right or wrong or better or worse? ...and I mean anything. That passion for politics which you just discovered on social media in the last year (whether it's liberal or conservative), your pet cause that you support or whatever it is that you're most passionate about and want others to care about too, none of that matters if there is no God. If there is no God, then there is no Grand Plan. There is no ultimate meaning or morality. There's just survival of the fittest.

And so if you're an going to be an honest atheist then any sense of meaning that you find in life is purely contrived. It's just what you've invented for yourself lest you actually face the true emptiness of an atheistic worldview: that you are a random cosmic accident, a tiny meaningless speck in a vast uncaring universe, an advanced mammal. Your atheistic worldview means that your feelings of love and being loved are nothing more than biologically driven impulses, just survival instincts, and that there is no satisfying explanation for all the sucky stuff that seems to always happen to you. Anything you accomplish in life ultimately makes no difference anyway because you're going to die and eventually be forgotten. Whenever your brain shuts off that's it for you, game over. And that's atheism. It's what's taught in public schools and universities. Isn't it awesome? Or is it empty? Meaning, purpose, morals, beauty, love. All empty illusions if atheism is true.

But of course, friends, today we celebrate Easter and there are no empty promises here! The reality is that Christ's tomb was discovered empty and this all the difference in the world. The empty tomb isn't hypothetical. It's historically verifiable. Even most critics of Christianity concede this point. The tomb of Jesus Christ was discovered empty, there was no corpse inside, and that is because there are not empty promises here! Faith in Jesus Christ isn't like other so-called religions. Christianity isn't just a collection of wise sayings like those of Confucius for example. It's founded on the fact of Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead in real time which he predicted as the evidential proof that he is the Son of God—the only name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (cf. Acts 4:12).

This reality of the resurrection is attested by his empty tomb that was being guarded by professional soldiers whose lives were on the line. It was verified by multiple eye-witnesses to whom Jesus appeared over the next 40 days and in the process transformed many of them from scared skeptics who were afraid to even be known as Jesus' friends on Good Friday into fearless missionaries and martyrs after Easter. It was demonstrated by the rapid spread of this brand new faith in the midst of a hostile world where both the Jews and the Romans wanted it to be snuffed out. And what fueled the spread of this new faith?

This bold preaching of Christ's victory over death. A message of promises fulfilled. A message of the forgiveness of sins, of lives changed, of God's unconditional love, of acceptance, and eternal life. And as this message spread across the globe the same thing happened in people's hearts and lives as God wants to have happen in yours today. Faith replaced fear and the empty souls of the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the dying were *filled* with the hope of a Savior who said, "I am the resurrection and life."

Friends, there are no empty promises here! There is hope. Enough hope to fill every one of your empty hearts because if your faith is in Jesus Christ you are on sure footing with God! <sup>18</sup> **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,** <sup>19</sup> **but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect...** <sup>21</sup> **Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.** 1 Peter 1:18-21

What does this empty tomb really mean? It means you have been redeemed. This means what Jesus accomplished on the cross on Good Friday was not in vain and this is vitally important. It means God the Father accepted the exchange that was made there—Christ's holy life in exchange for our unholy lives. It means all your sins are paid for now in full—everything you've ever said that you regret, everything you wish could be undone, every offensive attitude or ungodly thought that you've ever had. The cross means your empty way of life, your this-world-centered life, your me-centered-existence has been redeemed. No longer can Satan point his crooked finger at you and accuse you. No longer can the inmates of hell claim that you deserve to serve a sentence there for breaking God's commandments here. You are forgiven! Your record has been cleared. Through holy baptism you've been washed clean and clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness. You've been redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Your prison cell in hell is and will forever be empty of you because of Jesus' payment for your sins guaranteed by the empty tomb. **Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.** There are no empty promises here!

So here's a promise I want to share with you today. It's from Psalm 16:11, a Messianic Psalm, which says <sup>11</sup> **You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.**

You heard how Jesus redeemed us from an empty way of life which leads to death. Today through his word he now makes known the path that leads to life. Wow! I mean, wow! Friends, which path will you pursue from this day forward? You don't have to settle anymore for the empty promises of this world. Empty promises like you'll be happy if you just get more... more stuff, more money, more sex, more "likes" on social media, more friends, more respect, more recognition, more whatever, etc. Those pursuits will always leave you empty again. You don't have to settle anymore for the empty promises of instant gratification. Those temporary pleasures will always let you down and leave your soul empty. Rather friends, let God fill you up. Let the living God fill up the empty spaces of your soul with his grace in the way that only he can as you continue to pursue the path of life found in his word. You see there are no empty promises here!

So if you're present today or you're watching online and you've been running on empty in life, or if you've been feeling like you're not sure you how you're going to keep on keeping on...remember this promise. <sup>11</sup> **You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.** Because of Jesus, this is no empty promise. Amen!