

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin  
April 16, 2017

## Come Empty to an Empty Tomb to be Filled

*“He has filled the hungry with good things  
but the rich he has sent away empty”*

Mary, the Mother of our Lord, in Luke 1:53

### Matthew 28:1-15

*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.”*

*<sup>11</sup> While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. <sup>12</sup> When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, <sup>13</sup> telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ <sup>14</sup> If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” <sup>15</sup> So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*

Mary's song has been going through my mind this weekend. It was a song of joy that she sang when she was pregnant with Jesus. One sentence is an endless refrain in my mind: “He has filled the hungry with good things but the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:53).

She had been filled that special day. She was celebrating with her cousin Elizabeth that she was privileged to be the mother of our Lord and Savior Jesus!

But think of what the Saturday of Holy week was like for Mary. Suddenly for her and so many others, they were absolutely empty. There was no hope. There was no joy. Could there be a life after Jesus' death? No mother wants to outlive her child. So much more would this be true for Mary who saw her son's horrible death.

That's the way it was for the other women too. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James. Salome, Joanna, and others. Each gospel writer mentions one or the other... possibly because they had had a chance to talk to each of those women whom they named personally.

They came out empty. Easter Sunday began as a sad day for them.

Contrast that with the chief priests. Their lives appeared very full. They had just accomplished a long-held dream, to get rid of this thorn in their flesh called Jesus. They were in positions of power. They were wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of most people of that day.

We aren't told that they went out to the tomb that day. They didn't need to. They had others who would go for them. And when the word came that Jesus was alive, it was not a message that they wanted. They were full, so they rejected this message and made plans so that no one else could be filled with this message of hope either.

Which are you? If you are already empty, welcome! I think first of the family that I visited with yesterday as part of my duties as a police chaplain. Their mother never woke up. The husband was in shock. He was empty. I think of those family members here who have lost loved ones, and this is the first Easter without a mother or a spouse or a child. You are coming to the tomb this morning empty. Welcome!

Others of you haven't been so dramatically emptied. You may be experiencing the power of sin in your marriages. They are on the rocks. Others of you are empty because you have remained single, and not willingly. Some of you have just had a horrible diagnosis of cancer, and you come empty. Still others of you are empty, simply because you understand that "the wages of sin is death," and you know that sentence of death hangs over you because you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner.

If you join me at the empty tomb this morning empty, I can assure you that you will be filled.

But obviously some of us are full. Like the chief priests we have just about everything we need right now. Perhaps you have come to this tomb of a church, not because of your own emptiness, but to simply fulfill a family duty, to fulfill what is expected. If that is the case, I am so glad you are here.

But I pray that you have a Jonah experience.

Jonah had been full too. He was a prophet of the Lord. But when the Lord called him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, Jonah had other plans. He decided to do his own thing and go in the opposite direction to the far side of the world.

But the Lord loved Jonah enough to empty out Jonah. On the sea a storm came up, Jonah was cast overboard, and he was swallowed by a big fish.

Now some of you may be saying, “That is just another one of those crazy Bible stories.” If that’s the case for you, please bear with me a bit and I’ll explain why I do believe that Jonah really was swallowed by a fish. But right now, let’s follow along with Jonah.

This was a man who was full of himself. He knew better than God. He wasn’t going to preach to the city of Nineveh. But God helped him see how empty he was. In the depths of the sea, he saw death staring him in the face. In those depths, Jonah became truly empty. And in that emptiness, he was in a position to be filled. Then as someone hungry, he turned to the Lord for help (Our Old Testament Lesson for Easter is Jonah’s prayer in Jonah 2.).

I mention this because God can... and must... perform this miracle in our hearts. We all have this tendency to be full... to be happy with what we have and get so involved in this life that there is nothing left that we need. But the Lord loves you and me. Why does he send that storm on the sea for Jonah? Why does he send that storm into your married life or your family life or your health? Why does he take someone you love away from you? So that you come to him empty so that you can be filled. It is my prayer that God works this miracle in each of us, that we see that in so many ways we are empty... not able to preserve our life alive... and come empty to the tomb.

The great news I want to share with you is that you will find this tomb empty.

Matthew takes on the claim: “This is just a story!” Did the disciples make it up? The chief priests were absolutely right to attack at this point. If the tomb isn’t empty, then there is nothing at all to this Jesus. If the tomb isn’t empty, if you can be convinced this is just a nice story that gullible people of the past made up and then believed, then we are all wasting our time. Then all that there is to life is trying to make our lives as full as we can, because some day we will die and that is it.

How do I know that the tomb is empty? I’ve been to Jerusalem. I’ve seen the empty tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I’ve seen the empty tomb at the Garden Tomb. Both tombs are empty today. But that isn’t the issue. Was the tomb empty on Easter morning? That is the critical thing!

Note first that empty tomb was foretold! After this message, we will use 1 Corinthians 15 as our confession. That Jesus rose according to the Scriptures. The Old Testament had foretold that “after the suffering of his soul, he would see the light of life” (Isaiah 53). Jesus himself foretold

it. Remember what the angels said? “He has risen just as he said.” Every time Jesus foretold his suffering and death, he also foretold his resurrection on the third day. Before the event, the disciples couldn’t understand it. No one rises from the dead. But it happened, as the Old Testament foretold and as Jesus foretold.

And then it is the confession of the condemned.

This is a critical thing for you and I to understand. If you aren’t an eyewitness yourself, how do you know something has happened in history? Only because there are enough eyewitnesses to convince you.

Why do you suppose the Gospels mention the women first? Because they knew he was dead. They saw him taken down dead from the cross. They saw him “dead and buried.” And they are the first to see him alive. Why four gospels, each adding different details? To give four independent witnesses!

And I call it the “confession of the condemned.” If you read the book of Acts, you quickly see how this is true. James is executed. Peter is imprisoned. Later Paul as well. All could not deny what they had seen. The one who was dead is alive again.

If you are questioning what I call the “chain of custody,” is the Bible a reliable witness? Join in the *Following the Promise* Bible study on Tuesday evenings. In fact, we will study this very issue in the next two weeks!

By the way... the story about Jonah being swallowed by a big fish? Jesus said it happened. If it is true that Jesus rose from the dead, then the idea that a big fish swallows Jonah... or that God is strong enough to create the world in six days and to care about my personal needs... if Jesus died and rose... then all these things are true as well.

If the tomb is empty... then you and I can leave the tomb full. This is what we will be studying in the next few weeks. Look at the schedule in the “next steps” at the bottom of the worship folder. If the tomb is empty, then our hearts can be full of hope, then our hands are full of God’s richest blessings even when they look and feel empty, then our lives are filled with purpose even when we are doing the monotonous tasks of the day, and then we look forward to a home full of family members... an eternal home for each of us in heaven. I can’t wait to think through these truths.

In the meantime, let me close with just a few ways that you can now leave this empty tomb and be filled.

May you be filled with companionship. If the tomb is empty, then Jesus’ promise is true: “Surely I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” What a comfort it is to face incredible challenges and know that we aren’t facing them alone. Over and over in the Old Testament God

tells his people, “I am with you.” That is true for you too! God is with you. Leave this empty tomb filled with the companionship of the Savior. You are never alone.

May you be filled with the Lord’s promises. Jesus said, “All authority or power is given to me.” There is no promise that the risen Savior cannot fulfill. The greatest promise that he has given us is that his death on the cross was sufficient payment for all our sins. As 1 John 2:1-2 says, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the whole world.”

May you be filled with the Lord’s life. Jesus promised his disciples: “Because I live, you also shall live” (John 14:19). If Jesus is alive, then you are truly alive now, living in God’s presence and enjoying a relationship with him that not even death can end. And just as surely as Jesus rose from the dead we too will rise.

“He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.” I’m getting hungry for our Easter dinner. The temptation will be for me to begin snacking as soon as I walk in the door after the last service because I am so hungry. If I fill myself with junk, I’ll not be able to enjoy the great meal that Joni is preparing for me and the rest of the family. So I bear with that empty feeling now, knowing that I will be filled.

So too, I pray that you experience some emptiness now. Because when we come empty to the empty tomb, we come away filled. Amen.

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### **My Next Steps**

- **Come with an empty heart:** Join us April 23 to let the empty tomb fill you with hope.
- **Come with empty hands:** Join us April 30 to let the empty tomb fill you with every gift you need.
- **Come with an empty life:** Join us May 7 to let the empty tomb fill your life with purpose even when everything you do seems monotonous.
- **Come with an empty home:** Join us on Mother’s Day, May 14, to let the empty tomb fill your home with a vision of a perfect home.