

Empty Promises

Luke 23:44 – 24:12

April 21, 2019

Introduction:

The great 19th century showman P. T. Barnum has been quoted as saying, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” While it’s debated whether he actually said that or not, there is no debate in my mind that it implicitly serves as the underlying axiom of all modern-day marketing. Every company, no matter what they sell, always promise more than they can deliver. The commercials you watch on television, the ads you find in magazines, the billboards littered across the highway all make grand promises about how using their bar of soap or drinking their beer or driving their car or wearing their brand of clothing or using their perfume will revolutionize your life. It will make you look cool. You’ll be popular. You’ll have peace of mind. You will be happy and successful. And of course if you’re a guy you’ll have beautiful scantily-clad women throw themselves at you.

It all sounds so wonderful, so fulfilling, so desirous... except for one little problem: it never quite works out that way, does it? These things might start off to be thrilling and new and exciting, but it doesn’t take long before you’re back to being the same old you that you’ve always been, living the same old life with all its difficulties and disappointments. All these promises are never fulfilled. They never give us what they offered. C. S. Lewis said this about us,

“Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.”¹

The world is full of empty promises. We acutely want joy and happiness. We long for a sense of meaning and purpose. We want to love and be love. We want to have a sense of value and worth, and so we seek out those things which the world claims will grant us our wishes: money and sex, success and health, popularity and power, cars and houses and vacations and electronic gadgets. But yet they always end up failing us. We never have enough money or power or climb high enough up the corporate ladder to achieve the happiness we long for. We still lie on our beds at night only to find the inescapable gnawing inside our hearts that in spite of all I own and all I’ve achieved, it’s still not enough. I’m not as rich or as beautiful or as successful or as healthy or as happy as I really want to be. So we hop back on the treadmill and continue to acquire more and achieve more in hopes that maybe if we go just a little further down the road, we can finally obtain what the world has promised us

All this world can offer us are empty promises. No car, no house, no gadget can even ultimately bring you joy, give you satisfaction, or bring peace into your heart. Only God can do that. Only God our creator, who made us and knows us perfectly, can be our true source of happiness and significance; all else will inevitably fail us. As Augustine of Hippo famously said back in the fourth century, *“You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”*

So how does God do this? How is it that God meets the deepest desires of our hearts? Ironically, he does so through “empty promises” of his own, but empty promises of a very different sort. Unlike the empty promises of the world, God’s “empty promises” will be fulfilled, but instead of finding their fulfillment in a full career or a life full of health and wealth, God uses three empty things to fulfill his promises to us. I want to spend the rest of our time together this Easter morning to consider three of these “empty promises” of God and see how God uses them to grant us those things our hearts all long for. So even though today is Easter, we need to begin by considering the events of Good Friday, which brings us to the first of the “empty promises” of God, which is...

“Empty promise” #1: An empty cross

After three years of Jesus going around teaching and preaching and healing the sick, the Jewish religious leaders had finally had enough. Things were just fine until Jesus came along. They were looked up to as paragons of virtue. Everyone regarded them to be wise and holy people, who both knew the Law of God and meticulously obeyed it. They had wealth, power, respect, and most certainly the Lord’s favor on their side. But then Jesus came and overturned the proverbial apple cart.

Jesus taught with an authority they didn’t possess. He challenged their long-standing traditions. He did miracles such as healing the sick and casting out demons and even raising the dead! As a result people everywhere were flocking to him. But even worse, he had the audacity to claim equality with God himself! Jesus claimed he and the Father were one and that he had authority to even forgive sins! Clearly this heretical rabble-rouser had to go. So they hatched a plan. Pay off one of Jesus’ disciples to betray him, have him arrested on trumped up charges, and let the Romans take care of the rest. That’s exactly what they did and it worked. In less than 24 hours Jesus went from being a free man to being arrested, tried, tortured, and hung on a Roman cross.

But Jesus didn’t hang on the cross for too terribly long: three hours to be precise and then he died. Listen to what the gospel of Luke has to say about it in Luke 23, starting at v. 44. **“It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”** Skipping ahead a bit to v. 50, **“There was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.”**

One thing you need to understand about a Roman cross is that if you ever found yourself nailed to one, there was only one way you were getting off of it, and that was by death. The Romans had perfected the art of executing criminals: crucifixion was the perfect punishment to help deter anyone foolish enough to try to rebel against the authorities.

Allow me to give you the three “P’s” of crucifixion: first, it was **public**. Romans crosses were strategically placed to gain maximum exposure, such as along well-traveled roads. Your punishment was to be seen by as many people as possible. Second, it was **painful**. I don’t have time to get into the details, but I don’t think it’s too difficult to imagine the pain one would experience by being affixed to a cross by large nails driven through your hands and feet. Today we speak of excruciating pain, and that word “excruciating” is derived from the word “crucify.” Third, it was **prolonged**. It is reported that some men hung for days on a cross before their bodies finally gave out. The reason Jesus lasted only a few hours was because of the severe flogging and beating he experienced beforehand.

The point of all this is that when Jesus was taken off the cross, he was dead. He wasn’t unconscious. He wasn’t badly hurt but with a little bit of rest and some medicine he’d get better. He was dead. The empty cross means Jesus had died. The empty cross means Jesus did exactly what he said he set out to do: he bore our sins and suffered and died in our place. The empty cross is the first of God’s empty promises: it means Christ took the punishment we deserve for our sins. The empty cross means God provided a sacrificial lamb for his people. Like the ram God sent to Abraham so that Isaac would not be slain on the altar and like the Passover Lamb whose blood was shed so that the firstborn would not be slain during the tenth plague in Egypt, God sent his one and only Son to die for us. The empty cross means through Christ’s suffering and death God’s wrath against sin has been satisfied. It’s an “empty promise” that has been wonderfully fulfilled. As the apostle Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:21, *“He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

After Jesus had died, the gospel writers tell us his body was placed in a tomb. All fairly normal stuff after someone dies, at least until Easter morning. This brings us to the second of the “empty promises” we want to consider this morning, which is...

“Empty promise” #2: An empty tomb

Listen to how that first Easter morning is described as I read v. 1-12 of Luke 24. **“On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.’ And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.”**

Jesus was buried in a tomb that had a large heavy stone in front of it which was also guarded by Roman soldiers, as we're told in the parallel account in Matthew. In other words, Jesus' body wasn't going anywhere. The disciples, who had fled the night before when Jesus was arrested, were in no emotional condition to mount a rescue attempt and try to steal the body. As far as they were concerned, they could be next on the Roman hit list, by virtue of guilt by association. So they were much too shaken up and afraid to do anything, much less try to overpower highly trained Roman guards.

And let's face it, why should they? In order to explain away the resurrection, some people speculate that the disciples stole the body and then made up the story that Jesus rose from the dead. The Jewish leaders of the day tried that piece of propaganda and it still lives on today. But the small problem with it is that it makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. The disciples were running scared, fearing they might be crucified next. They had little chance of overpowering the Roman soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb. And even if they somehow did pull this stunt off, overwhelming the guards, rolling away this huge stone from the entrance, and then stealing the body away, what good would it do them? They were violently persecuted for their message that Jesus rose from the dead. Why would anyone suffer as they did for something they all knew was a lie? Certainly some of them would have recanted their position, yet none of them did.

There's a much simpler explanation and it's the one Luke and all the other gospel writers give: Jesus rose from the dead. God raised him from the dead and in the days following Easter, Jesus appeared to numerous people, demonstrating that he really was alive. The tomb was empty on Easter morning not because the disciples were pulling a fast one on us or because Jesus somehow revived from his wounds, single-handedly rolled away the stone, and overpowered the guards; it was because God the Father raised Jesus from the dead.

So the empty tomb is our second "empty promise" of God. When we consider the empty tomb on Easter morning, we're to remember the promise that God was fully satisfied in Christ. Jesus' resurrection is God's undeniable statement of saying, "This is my Son, with whom I am well-pleased." Jesus suffered God's wrath in our place, for our sin. He didn't die for his sins because he didn't have any. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is indeed the holy Son of God, God incarnate, with whom God was perfectly pleased. It is the undeniable proof of God's validation of everything Jesus said and did. The resurrection means the promise that God would provide a spotless Lamb to atone for our sins has been fulfilled in Christ.

Also, the empty tomb should cause us to remember the promise of eternal life. Death is not the end. From our earthly perspective, a man lives, he dies, he's buried, and we never see nor hear from him again. But Easter morning is a reminder that there is more to come. In John 3:16 it says, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*" Easter is about the blossoming of eternal life. Jesus is the first of those who have died but will be raised to new life. For all those who've trusted in Christ as their Lord and Savior, death is not the end; it is only the beginning of eternal life, which we taste in part in the here and now, but will experience in its fullness at the resurrection of the dead.

But there is one more “empty promise” we need to consider this morning. We’ve looked at the empty cross first, followed by the empty tomb, and now we need to turn in look inward at ourselves to find our third “empty promise” which is...

“Empty promise” #3: An empty life

Listen as I read from 1 Peter 1. It says this, **“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, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect... Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”**

Peter speaks of an empty way of life. That’s the kind of life many people live. Perhaps even some of you are living that life right now. It’s a life that’s always trying to fill that void in your heart, the longing deep inside you that always hungers but never seems to be filled. We all know it’s there: we long for significance, security, love, peace, fulfillment and contentment. It’s the appetite we all try to fill but always end up coming up empty.

We all try different methods of filling that emptiness. The pursuit of wealth is a common one: we buy more and more things: larger houses, faster cars, more lavish vacations, get newer and slicker electronic gadgets, but they all lose their luster. What is exciting one day is passé and boring the next. So we try to buy more and more, newer and faster items but for every one step forward, we end up taking two steps back.

Or we try to fulfill that emptiness through sex. We think, perhaps that longing to be loved can be filled in the arms of multiple men who will tell you for a time that they love you. Perhaps the significance you long for can be discovered in bedding a different girl every weekend. Maybe the cure for the ho-drums of your marriage is the tantalizing affair you keep carefully hidden from your spouse and children. Maybe the empty loneliness inside can be averted for a time by come-hither looks of the women on those web sites who are only a few clicks away.

We can also try to fill that emptiness with busyness. Work long hours, get that promotion, and then I’ll really be someone! Then I’ll be respected. Then I’ll matter. Or if you can’t busy yourself with work, you busy yourself with leisure. You don’t need to think about the emptiness of your life when you have the TV to distract you every evening. Or social media can be a way to fill that void: if people reply to your Facebook post, read your blog, and follow your Tweets, then you must really be significant and loved. Yet none of those things ultimately deliver on their promise. There’s always someone more successful, more popular on Facebook, and is more articulate on their blog. And so if you’re honest with yourself, the void is never filled. The emptiness of life remains. Your soul has become an abyss that is never filled, no matter how much stuff you try to cram into it. Nothing in this world ultimately gives you what you long for.

While this is a source of deep frustration for many, the “empty promise” of an empty life is that there is fulfillment to be found; it’s just we’re looking in the wrong places. If I might quote C. S. Lewis once again, he writes this,

“The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.’”²

Do you see what C. S. Lewis is saying? Contained within the emptiness of your life is a promise that your hunger can be fulfilled. It’s not just there to frustrate you as if it were an itch that can never be scratched. The desires for love, security, significance, peace, and joy can be satisfied, but only by the one thing designed to satisfy them: not money, sex, power, or success, but in Christ.

Jesus said in John 10:10, *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* The empty cross and the empty tomb are the keys to filling up your empty life with abundance. The empty cross means that God loved you so much that he sent his Son to die for you in order to save you. If you’re looking for love (and we all are!), find it in God’s love for you in Christ. You were created by him to know him and only his love can bring you the loving acceptance that your heart craves.

I don’t know how many of you have seen the *Toy Story* movies, but if you haven’t you owe it to yourself to do so. The toys are driven by the exact same existential crisis in all three films. Do you know what that is? It’s the desire to be loved. To not be loved as a toy is to call into question their very significance, their very existence. When Woody is threatened to be replaced by Buzz Lightyear in the first movie, he panics. His purpose is tied up in being loved by Andy, the boy who owns him. In the second movie Jesse is utterly depressed and bitter because the girl who once loved her grew up and gave her to Goodwill. And in the third movie, Andy has now grown up and is about to head off to college and the toys are desperately trying to cling to any last bit of loving attention they can get from him before they get stored away in the attic or thrown out in the trash.

All the *Toy Story* movies ultimately deal with the same issue: the search for significance by being loved and what is true for them is true for us. We want to be loved. We want to know that we’re important to someone. But we look for it in all the wrong places. Yet the empty cross says, “Here’s the love you are looking for. Here’s the acceptance you want. Here’s the significance you’ve been chasing after.” God loved you and sent his Son to die for you. He has accepted you because Jesus paid the punishment you deserve. He has forgiven you because the wrath of God was satisfied in Christ. You are significant because God has redeemed you with the price of his Son’s shed blood. Through faith he has made you a son or daughter of God. Like the way Andy scribbled his name on the bottom of Woody’s boot, God has written his name on your heart through Christ.

And the empty tomb tells us that this life isn’t meaningless. It puts to an end the lie that we should “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.” It means that we don’t just spin our wheels for the few dozen decades of our lives and then all comes to naught. It says to us, “Your life matters. What you do here echoes into eternity. Death is not the end: our acts of kindness, our deeds of charity, our offers of forgiveness, our sacrifice of love, those things we gave up and the suffering we endured matter. In Christ, God takes those

things and makes them new and makes them pure. The empty cross and the empty tomb tell us that there need not be an empty life, provided one turns to Christ to fill it. He left the cross empty and left the tomb empty so that he could come into your empty heart and fill it with the riches of the blessings of God.

Conclusion

So let me close by asking you, “Is your life empty? Have you been vainly trying to fill the empty gaping void in your life through everything but God? Have you tried to find love and significance, peace and hope, joy and contentment in all those empty promises the world offers you? Has money and power, wine and women, success and popularity, given you what you long for, or can you be honest enough to say in the words of Bono from U2 that, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for?”

Let me tell you, you will never find what you’re looking for until you look to Christ. To those who turn from their striving after the things of this world, to those who despair of every trying to achieve happiness apart from God, to those who are sick of an empty life lived in the pursuit of their own self-centered passions, to those who want true life, abundant life, a life full of joy and peace and forgiveness and love and hope, Jesus says to you, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*

Easter is a time of new birth and Jesus offers that to all who would come to him in faith. The good news of the gospel is that God loved you so much that he sent his Son to take upon himself the punishment you deserved on the cross. He offers to exchange your guilt and shame for his love and forgiveness if you would only surrender yourself to him. That means you must turn away from sin and turn to Christ in faith. When you do that, when you come to him not just as some great moral teacher, but as the Savior who died for you on the cross and the Lord who rose triumphant over death, he will give you new life. Not only will you be raised from the dead and live forever with him in heaven, but he will give you new life in the here and now. Scripture says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come! And not only does he give you peace, he gives you power: power to resist the sin that once characterized you and the power to live the kind of life that brings God pleasure and you joy.

I’m going to close in a moment with a prayer and I would invite any of you to join me in praying it. You don’t need to live an empty life of sin. You don’t need to engage in the futile pursue of trying to fill the hole in your heart with all those things which promise you happiness but never deliver. Christ is the answer. He offers forgiveness, love, joy, and peace to any sinner who wishes to turn to him and discover the power of a truly full, abundant, and resurrected life in him. Please join me now as I pray.

Endnotes

1. Lewis, C. S. Mere Christianity. Harper Collins: New York, 1952.
2. Ibid.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2019.