

Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007
First Trinity Lutheran Church
Luke 24:1-12

It's Unbelievable

I have told this story before but it is appropriate to tell it again this morning. A young man from a wealthy family was about to graduate from high school. It was the custom in that affluent neighborhood for the parents to give the graduate an automobile. "Bill" and his father had spent months looking at cars, and the week before graduation, they found the perfect car. On the eve of his graduation, his father handed him a gift wrapped Bible. Bill was so angry that he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house. He and his father never saw each other again. It was the news of his father's death that brought Bill home again. As he sat one night going through his father's possessions that he was to inherit, he came across the Bible his father had given him. He brushed away the dust and opened it to find a cashier's check, dated the day of his graduation - in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.

As I thought about this story, I couldn't help but wonder how many people have done the same thing to God, that is tossed aside a wonderful promise perhaps because they didn't understand it or believe it was possible. In our world, we are taught that; "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." So many of us have been taken in by the promise of a free gift, "that we are leery of anything or anyone that tells us we can have something for nothing. We don't believe it because the world simply doesn't work that way!

But, God does! That is makes a promise that sounds too good to be true. The truth of the matter is, the world is full of empty promises. We watch TV, and the advertisements tell us that we can be happy, sexy, rich, or famous, if we only purchase a certain product. It doesn't take long before we have been fooled enough to know that the world's promises are empty. But, God is different. Instead of empty promises on Easter his promises are fulfilled in what we see as empty.

This morning, I would like us to think about the promises of Easter. I have found three objects in the Easter story that indicates emptiness but are full of promise. The objects are the empty cross, the empty tomb, and the empty burial clothes.

Let's begin with the empty cross. Because the cross was empty, we have the promise that are sins are forgiven. Let's go back to that 1st Easter Morning. It is early morning – dawn – but the sun has not risen. A few of Jesus followers – women – are on their way to a tomb. It is the tomb where Jesus was buried. They have been walking now for about ½ hour. The conversation is subdued. The task before them is a sad one. They are going to anoint the body of Jesus. As they come to the top of a rise in the path, they stop. Motionless and quiet, they stare off in the distance. As you look with them, look off to the right, just outside the city stands a gruesome reminder of the events of just a few days ago. Do you see it? Over there, silhouetted by the glow of the pink sky, on top of the Hill the locals call, “The Skull.” 3 Crosses. Yesterday was the Sabbath, so nobody had yet removed them. So, there they stand, an empty reminder of the horror of Friday. The one in the middle, that is the one that I want you to see. That's the one that Jesus hung on. Take a close look at it. Look up at the top – those bloodstains are from the crown of thorns that was crushed into Jesus' skull. The stains on the ends of the crossbar – they came from the nails that were driven into his hands. The main beam – it was soaked in blood – blood from his back – blood that flowed when the Roman soldiers beat him. It also has stains from the blood that poured his side when another Roman soldier ran a spear through his side to see if he was dead – HE WAS. There was no question – Jesus was dead. The soldiers knew it, the Romans knew it, and the Jews knew it. Together, they made up a lie – the disciples stole the body. Can you imagine 11 fishermen overpowering a company of Roman soldiers, moving a 2 ton stone and stealing the body of Jesus – just so they could claim he had come back to life – and then willingly die to protect that lie.

You see, Jesus really did die – that is why I want you to see the cross this morning. It is the place where he died – but today, it is empty. Empty of Jesus body, but full – full of God’s promises. Full of hope – for you and me. The fact that the promise is empty gives us the promise of forgiveness. Because it was on that cross that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. “SIN” – now there is a word that is just not popular anymore. It’s a word that isn’t “politically correct.” But, the simple fact of the matter is – we have all sinned. Every one of us – you, I, the person sitting next to you, behind you and in front of you. We have “all sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God.”

So, here is the problem – according to God’s law - “the wages of sin is death.” He says; “The soul that sins will surely die.” Because, we have sinned, we deserve God’s just punishment. We deserve “eternal death.” However, when you look at that empty cross – it is a reminder of God’s promise that we have been forgiven. On that cross – Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. When Jesus Christ breathed his last, he cried out; “It is finished.” The penalty was paid. On that cross – that empty cross – It was there, that his blood was shed for our salvation. The empty cross – filled with the promise of forgiven sins.

Let us now go back to the women going to the tomb. After pausing briefly to view the cross, they continue on their way down the path to the tomb. As they go, one of them wonders aloud – “who will move the stone for us?” They have good reason to be concerned – the stone that was placed in front of the tomb was a large boulder – probably weighing upwards of two ton. Not only that, the Romans had sealed it, so no one was allowed to move it without their permission. However, the women continue. Suddenly, they feel the earth move! Frightened, they look at each other, not certain what to do. After a few minutes, things seem normal so they continue on their way. As they approach the burial site, they are still wondering about what had happened when they come upon something even more remarkable. The soldiers are all unconscious. The stone has been moved. An angel – glowing like lightening – is sitting on it.

Listen to his words – “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who has been crucified. He is not here; He has risen – He was alive – the tomb was empty. And what a tremendous promise that holds.

The empty tomb gives us the promise of eternal life. To those who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, death has lost its sting – it is no longer something to be feared. What fear is there when we have the promise that one-day we will live forever with Him in Heaven? There is a story of a father and son who were traveling down a country road on afternoon in the springtime when suddenly a bee flew in the window. Being deathly allergic to bee stings, the boy began to panic as the bee buzzed all around inside the car. Seeing the horror on his child’s face, the father reached out and caught the bee in his hand. Soon, he opened his hand and the bee began to buzz around once again. Again, the boy began to panic. The father reached over to his son, and opened his hand showing him the stinger still in his palm. “Relax, son,” the father said, “I took the sting, the bee can’t hurt you anymore.” The empty tomb is God’s way of saying to us; “Relax, my child, I took the sting, death can’t hurt you anymore.” Why was the tomb empty? Because Jesus was alive – The Angel said; “He is risen.” And the promise to us is that we too can live even if we die. That is the second promise of Easter. But, it doesn’t end there. There is one more empty object that I want to talk about. It is the empty burial clothes. Back to our story. After the Angel had spoken to the women, they immediately went back to the Apostles and reported what had happened. With this incredible news, Peter and John immediately raced back to the tomb to see for themselves. When they got there, John stopped just outside the tomb, but Peter ran right in. It didn’t take them long to discover that the tomb was just the way the women had said it was – empty. But, that’s not all. Inside, Peter found the clothes that Jesus had been buried in. They too were empty. This could only mean one thing – Jesus was alive! If someone had stolen his body, they wouldn’t have removed the burial clothes and folded them up neatly and left them where they lay. Truly, Jesus was resurrected! It wouldn’t

be long, before Jesus, himself would appear to Mary Magdalene, and to all of the Apostles, and eventually to over 500 people.

You see, that is the promise of the empty burial clothes – Jesus is alive, and wants to fellowship with you. Jesus isn't some nebulous "force" out in the universe influencing people. He is a living Savior, and he desires to have a personal relationship with each one of us, just as he did with his disciples 2000 years ago. Think about that – the cross couldn't hold him, the tomb couldn't contain him, the burial clothes were unnecessary, because Jesus is alive! And he talked, and touched and loved and healed.

I think at Easter, more than any other time of the year, we realize that God has made all sorts of incredible promises. So incredible that some of us cannot bring ourselves to believe, or, can we? This morning, we have heard about three promises that God has made to us; the promise of forgiven sins; the promise of eternal life; and the promise of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. My question to you this morning is this; will you take him at his word? If so, listen to this final promise – it is found in Romans 10:13 – “for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” This morning, if you have never accepted God's promises for your life, don't wait another day, do it today, and know the joy of eternal life in Jesus Christ.