

EASTER'S 'EMPTY' PROMISES

*When they had done all that the prophets said about him, they took him down from the cross and placed him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead...And now we are here to bring you this Good News. The **promise** was made to our ancestors, and God has now fulfilled it for us, their descendants, by raising Jesus... For God had **promised** to raise Him from the dead, not leaving him to rot in the grave. He said, 'I will give you the sacred blessings I **promised** to David. Acts 13:29-39*

We are in the heat of a full-fledged political season right now. Even candidates' preachers are being scrutinized, criticized and evaluated. The television's carry numerous debates, and endless analysis of every move every candidate makes, every sound bite they utter, even every thought they might think. But one overriding sentiment seems to accompany this sensational political season more than any other; "promises, promises...oh what empty promises abound."

I wish that whoever is elected might fulfill half the promises I've heard these past weeks. I'd love to have free health care, troops home from war, \$2 gas, always rising stock markets, endless social security payments, less crime, less illegal aliens, more policemen, firemen, social services and the granddaddy of them all...all this without raising my taxes! I'm not saying every politician utters only empty promises...it just seems that way to me.

Today, this Easter Sunday, 2008, I want to consider some "empty" promises; but not the political kind I've mentioned, no, three promises fulfilled, from 3 empty sources in this amazing Easter event. Remember, it started with a virgin's empty womb, and ends...well, let's see how it ends! From Author Phillip Brooks:

Tomb, You shall not hold Him longer,
Death is strong, but life is stronger
Stronger than the dark, the light;
Stronger than the wrong, the right;
Faith and hope triumphant say;
Christ will rise on Easter Day.

While the patient earth lies waiting
Till the morning shall be breaking
Shuddering beneath the burden dread
Of her Master, cold and dead,
Hark! She hears the angels say;
Christ will rise on Easter Day.

And when sunrise smites the mountains
Pouring light from heavenly fountains
Then the earth blooms out to greet
Once again the blessed feat;
And her countless voices say;
Christ has risen on Easter Day.

1. THE EMPTY CROSS PROMISES FORGIVENESS

*He used his servant body to carry our sins to the **Cross** so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way. His wounds became your healing. You were lost sheep with no idea who you were or where you were going. 1 Peter 2:24-25*

*When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's **cross**. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the **Cross** and marched them naked through the streets. Col. 2:13-15*

Because of the cross, we have the promise of forgiven sins. Speaking of politicians, and political correctness; I don't hear much mention from many of our candidates about the reality of sin in our world, and in our hearts. But its reality cannot be dismissed by willful neglect or negligent attention. We are a sinful people, and most if not all the ills these politicians promise to solve, can find their origins in the sinful hearts of wayward humans.

I don't know why we shy away from admitting this reality. I don't know who we think we are fooling, to pretend that the sin curse doesn't affect us. I don't understand how ignoring an obvious problem can in any way solve that problem. In fact, I know the opposite approach to be the only effective one. But admitting our sinfulness is only half the battle.

We are helpless, we humans to forgive our own sins, and we are powerless to live above sin. But we are not without help. Jesus lived to teach us how to live; how to treat each other, how to love one another, how to give and share. But Jesus died, to make that kind of living possible. In our sinfulness, we are not interested in anything but our own self-advantage. Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive us for the sins we commit because of our nature; he died on the cross to forgive us the sins we commit because we have chosen to; and he died on the cross to forgive us the sins we commit habitually; unsatisfied to sin just once! The other half the battle...is His, and He's won!

On that Empty Cross, our sin problem was dealt with. Listen to how John Newton, the famous author of Amazing Grace recounted this reality in another of his unpublished hymns:

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career:
I saw One hanging on a Tree
In agonies and blood,
Who fixed His languid eyes on me.
As near His Cross I stood.

Sure never till my latest breath,
Can I forget that look:
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke:
My conscience felt and owned the guilt,
And plunged me in despair:
I saw my sins His Blood had spilt,
And helped to nail Him there.

Alas! I knew not what I did!
But now my tears are vain:
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I the Lord have slain!

A second look He gave, which said,
"I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I die that thou may'st live."

Thus, while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too.
With pleasing grief, and mournful joy,
My spirit now is filled,
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live by Him I killed!

The Empty Cross Promises Forgiveness

2. THE EMPTY CASKET PROMISES ETERNITY

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given eternal life. I Cor. 15:20-22

To those who have received the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and have come to know the power of the resurrected Lord...death has lost its sting...it is no longer something to be feared. This is no fanciful pipe dream meant to falsely bolster up folks experiencing the real agony of losing loved ones. It is a factual reminder that because the tomb of Jesus was, AND IS STILL EMPTY, our hope lies somewhere beyond the grave!

There is a story of a little boy riding in the car with his daddy on a spring day when a bee enters through an open window. The boy is deathly allergic to the bee sting, and begins to panic. His daddy, with deft agility, snatches the bee out of mid air...only to release it, just a few seconds later. Again his young son begins to panic. His dad then opens his hand and says to his fearful son; "No worries my boy, see here...his stinger is in my hand...that nasty bee is no longer any danger to you."

On his weekend journey to the pit of hell; Jesus snatched the power of death from its demonic master; and renders it powerless to inflict its poison any longer! The empty casket of Jesus makes death nothing more than the transitional instant whereby we leave the time and space of this world, and awaken in the next.

On the coast of Spain, where Christopher Columbus died in 1506, stands a monument commemorating the great discoverer. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the memorial is a statue of a lion destroying one of the Latin words that had been part of Spain's motto for centuries. Before Columbus made his voyages, the Spaniards thought they had reached the outer limits of earth. Thus their motto was "Ne Plus Ultra," which means "No More Beyond." The word being torn away by the lion's mouth is "Ne" or "no," making it read now; "Plus Ultra." Columbus had proven that there was indeed "more beyond." Jesus has proven more than Columbus, that there is more beyond.

There is more beyond the grave than tears of sadness and goodbye. There are tears of joyful reunion with loved ones gone before. There is more beyond this world, this time, this place, this space. There is a place prepared by loving, nail-scarred hands; for prepared faith-filled people. There is more beyond this life. There is the next, and it is every bit as real as this one, with one major difference...that one will never end.

There is a secret passage way to the world beyond; it runs directly by the empty cross and directly through the empty tomb. Now that's a promise!

3. THE EMPTY CLOTHES PROMISE PRESENCE

Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrapping lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first went in, and he saw and believed – for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. John 20:3-9

Have you ever wondered what it was that made the disciples "believe"? Why the mention of the grave clothes...twice? Why note that the covering over Jesus' head was neatly folded and lying apart from the other wrappings?

The main theories proposed and believed by so many who wish to denounce the reality of the resurrection; is that someone came in and stole the body, or that Jesus revived from his beatings in the coolness of the tomb, rolled the stone away, and snuck past the snoozing guards.

One question remains however. How would robbers rewind the clothes to make them look wrapped? How or why would Jesus unwrap himself and return the clothes to their original position? And why would he fold the head gear and lay it separately if he was trying to hurriedly escape? It makes no sense. The only sense is found in what the disciples came to believe... the position of the clothes and the head scarf indicate only one thing...Jesus' body had been resurrected, vanished, miraculously sifted out from between the sheets, leaving them there for all the world to see.

You can debate the validity of the Shroud of Turin till you are blue in the face, but the promise of empty grave clothes is that Christ was now just outside the tomb waiting for the now-believing disciples...and he will be forever! They left this empty tomb, with its empty clothes and soon found Jesus walking along side them.

This promise is no less real for us, than for them. Jesus' resurrection and return to heaven has not left us void of his presence, but instead filled with his presence, while being surrounded by the Holy Spirit's presence. The promise of the empty clothes is Jesus' eternal presence.

Some legends say that the real meaning of the folded head cloth had to do with Jewish meal traditions. I don't know if it's true or not. When the master was finished eating, he simply left the table and threw his napkin on his plate to indicate to the servants, he was finished and would not be coming back to the table. They were then to proceed in cleaning up the table, and removing the food.

But, if there was an occasion when the master must leave the table before he finished eating, when his intention was to return to finish his meal, he would first carefully and neatly re-fold his napkin, and return it to its original position beside his plate.

Some would like to see in this folded head cloth, Jesus' message and signal to his new-believing disciples...I'll be back...I'm not finished yet! Whether the legend is true or not...the promise is; that in these empty clothes, the Disciples found their faith renewed. They would not be alone anymore.

My friends, these promises answer three of human beings greatest needs: how to find forgiveness for our sins, how to overcome the fear of death, and how to deal with the loneliness that living without Jesus inevitably brings. These "empty" promises are not empty, nor are they guaranteed by some politician or some preacher. They are promised and delivered by Christ the Lord...who is Risen today! AMEN

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