

## **EMPTY!**

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 24:13-32

April 28, 2019

### VIDEO - Empty

Many of us, likely most of us know something about feeling empty. At some time or another, we have known disappointment, discouragement, defeat, confusion, misery, heartache, anxiety, or failure. We have experienced what is best defined as a deep, inner sense of void or emptiness. This emptiness may follow an incident of emotional turmoil. It may be the result of cumulative experiences of disappointment and struggle. Often times, this emptiness is a place of darkness. It is a place almost devoid of emotions, a place of numbness, hopelessness and even deep despair.

I first came across the video you just watched a couple of weeks ago and it got stuck in my head. Even as I was preparing for last week's Easter resurrection message and anticipating a crowd of people well above our average Sunday attendance, that video kept coming to mind. And as it came to mind, it kept taking me to today, and to my past experiences of the Sunday after Easter. Because I've been in pastoral ministry in the local church for over 30 years, I've preached quite few Easter Sunday sermons. I've also preached a good number of Sunday after Easter sermons. However, I admit that I have occasionally taken the week after Easter as a vacation week, so overall I've preached fewer Sunday after Easter sermons than Easter Sunday sermons. But I've still preached plenty of both, so I know from experience the stark contrast in attendance and excitement between the two Sundays.

Therefore, if I had been consulted when the video was being made I would have suggested an additional "empty" segment, one that showed and said, "Empty pews." This experience of "empty pews" the Sunday after Easter is nothing new; I expect it. And even if the count for this Sunday after Easter is close to our average attendance, it still feels so much less after the excitement of worshiping with and preaching to an Easter Sunday crowd of 2-3 times higher than the average count. So here we are, the Sunday after Easter, and I admit that feelings of disappointment and failure have crept into my inner being even after all these years.

"Empty tank, empty carton, empty account, empty nest, empty heart, empty pews..." Perhaps there is an additional "empty" segment that comes to your mind, an emptiness that has been part of your life experience or the experience of someone you know. Think about that "empty" experience. Is anyone willing to share your "empty" segment experience by saying it out loud? Additional empty segments that came to my mind are empty hands, empty stomach, empty chair, empty promises... It's not unusual for times of emptiness to begin as real life, physical happenings, but those happenings often lead to corresponding and deeply felt emotional emptiness.

It is the experience of emptiness on this Sunday after Easter that takes us to today's Gospel lesson and the two relatively unknown followers of Jesus who are trudging along a dusty road. As we come upon the two followers of Jesus in chapter 24 of Luke, we are told that they are on the road and heading home to a place called Emmaus. Had they been in Jerusalem a week earlier when Jesus' entered the city on that Sunday we call Palm Sunday – that day when people gathered to welcome him with Palm branches and shouts of "hosanna?" We don't know, but apparently they were there on Friday when Jesus was crucified on a hill called Golgotha, a hill located

just a short distance outside the gates of Jerusalem. Because sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath day, it makes complete sense that the two followers would have stayed through the Sabbath before beginning their 7-mile journey home on Sunday morning.

Whereas there are differences in opinion, I strongly believe that the two followers are a couple, Cleopas and his wife. Not only was it a fairly common practice in those days to omit the name of a woman, it also appears that the two of them live in the same house. So even though most of the Emmaus road pictures that you may have seen over the years are likely of two men, I actually picture a husband and wife walking together those seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Cleopas and his wife may not have been numbered among the inner core of disciples, but they were followers nonetheless. They had felt a connection with Jesus and his message, and they felt devastated by what happened on Friday. As they walk that well known road home they are talking about what happened and consoling one another. They are clearly sad and discouraged as a stranger approaches them and begins walking beside them. Cleopas expresses their disappointment to the stranger, who we know is not a stranger, but at that point Cleopas and his wife know him only as a stranger. Cleopas said, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:21) Do you hear the deep disappointment and struggle expressed in that statement?

The crushing of hope is so devastating! All of Jesus' followers, whether they were numbered among the inner core or numbered among the extended group, they all had such great expectations, such great hope in what they thought it meant that the long-awaited Messiah had come to them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And even though Cleopas and his wife had heard that morning before leaving Jerusalem about the women not finding Jesus' body in the tomb and the appearance of angels saying he was "alive," the two followers seemed much more confused about what those early morning reports meant than hopeful.

In fact, most of Jesus followers, including his closest disciples failed to embrace hope as a result of the early morning reporting from Mary Magdalene and the other women. The two Emmaus followers simply left Jerusalem and returned home to their village; the inner circle of disciples continued to hide behind locked doors, "for fear of the Jews." (John 21:19) Feelings of disappointment and defeat, fear and confusion continued among Jesus' followers even after the angels announced that Jesus was alive. However, those feelings of hopelessness and emptiness were not, are not the end of the story... (VIDEO Conclusion)

So, here we are the week after Easter with our empty pews, and whatever other experiences of emptiness we have brought with us today. After all the excitement and joy of last Sunday's glorious celebration, every indication this week reveals that life is basically back to normal which means bad days and good days, discouragements and successes, struggles and victories. Mixed in with these lows and highs of daily life are those times when what we feel is most honestly described as emptiness.

But, Jesus is alive! What this means for us is that the One who defeated death, who broke out of that tomb is the One who walks along dusty roads with discouraged and confused followers. He is the One who shows up in locked rooms/hearts/minds to be with those who feel defeated and afraid. Jesus enters our homes, and is powerfully present when bread is broken and wine is shared. Jesus sits with us amidst the uncertainty of a surgical waiting room and beside the bed of a loved-one who will soon

see him face to face. The Risen Lord comes to us even in the mundane everyday experiences of driving a car, sitting behind our office desk, taking a test at school, pushing a lawnmower in the yard, and playing a game at the local baseball field. Whenever and wherever a sense of emptiness takes hold of our life, we are assured this day that the resurrected Lord is with us.

Because of Jesus our experiences of emptiness are redefined by an empty tomb. This is our hope today, tomorrow and forever. Thanks be to God!