

Easter Meditation (10:30 am)

**Read Luke 24:13-35**

A third grade Sunday school class included a boy who was a bit of slow learner. On Palm Sunday the teacher gave each child an empty plastic egg with instructions to come back on Easter morning with something in the egg that reminded them of Easter. After class the teacher asked the boy if he understood what to do. The boy nodded yes. The teacher made a note to contact his parents during the week to tell them the assignment also. On Easter morning the children gathered excitedly wanting to see what was in each egg. There was a flower, a stone, a cocoon, and more. With each egg the students would ooh and ahh. The last egg was the one the boy brought. When the teacher opened the egg, it was empty. At first the teacher thought this student had not really understood what she said the week before. It flashed through her mind that she had forgotten to call the boy's parents. The other students were snickering, as children sometimes do, so the teacher asked a question instead of making a statement: Why does your empty egg remind you of Easter? Without hesitation, the boy responded, "the tomb was empty!"

Today is no ordinary day. If we treat it like one, we are missing something in life. We are missing someone in our life. Today is not only a day for the Easter bunny, family gatherings, white pants and dresses, and a crowded worship experience with brass and timpani. Today is far more than each of these and all these together.

Can you think of an event that changed your life? Birth of a child, seeing the love of your life for the first time, 9-11, WWII, the depression, a tragic health episode, COVID, the day you got the news about..., confirmation or the day you made your public profession of faith. I want to challenge us to consider this day, April 4, 2021 to be a day that changes your life.

Easter has that kind of power and influence. The events that took place this day in history with the women who went to the tomb and then with Jesus appearing on the road to Emmaus are life changing events. And not just for those present that day, but for us today, who believe through faith that on this day, Easter, Jesus overcame death and darkness for good, gifting those who trust and believe and follow him with the gift of light and eternal life.

For the women, their life would never be the same after the encounter at the tomb with the angel. Their lives changed significantly when Jesus came into their lives earlier, when he taught and performed miracles, but being raised from the grave was a whole other level.

And for the men on the road, who had heard the stories but had not yet seen for themselves, when their eyes were opened at the table that day, they would never see or experience life the same again.

Just like those present during the time of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and eventual ascension, our lives are to never be the same after hearing the good news of God's love for us, God's promise of hope and strength that deliver us from the wilderness of life.

So, what needs to change. Two suggestions came to the surface this week as I cross referenced scriptures associated with Jesus' journey to the cross, death, and resurrection.

The first is to empty yourself for God. God gave it all. Jesus gave it all. For whom? Us. You and me. Paul says, "Jesus emptied himself, becoming a servant," which eventually meant sacrifice to the point of death. What does that mean? It means God loves us a lot and that we too are to empty ourselves for God.

To help remind us of this commitment to empty, let us think about "A.E.I.O.U." Vowels are a simple thing really that makes a significant impact on language. Whether writing, reading, or speaking, "A.E.I.O.U." play a big part.

I was given a business card at one point and on it was a saying. I do not recall the exact saying word for word, but I know it was directions for what to use the card for. The odd part about the letters on the card was that all the letters were consonants. No vowels were used to try to get the message across. The funny thing is I was able to read the card and get the message without the vowels. Some words were kind of tricky as I wondered whether it might start with a vowel or end with a vowel, but the content of the message was such that I could make do and decipher the message.

Here is the thing. I could read the card without vowels, meaning I could get by, but had the message gotten any more complicated, I was going to need some help. Vowels help provide clarity and emphasis in the right places of a word. Vowels help determine the true meaning of a word.

Since it is the beginning of a new baseball season, I thought I would quote Hall of Famer Johnny Bench from his book *Catch Every Ball: How to Handle Life's Pitches*. In his book, Bench refers to the vowels of success. These are also referred to as the "A.E.I.O.U.'s" for life. These vowels help guide and motivate a person to a successful life. To provide examples, Bench talks with many people we might consider having lived successfully or at least accomplished a lot. Bench used achieve, employability, inner conceit, opportunity, and use. Golfing Legend Arnold Palmer used attitude, effort, integrity, obstacles, and understanding. Gold medal gymnast Shannon Miller used action, enthusiasm, imagination, opportunity, and underestimate. Randy Owen, lead singer of "Alabama", used aggressive, energetic, intensity, organized, and undaunted.

What vowels for life would you identify with?

In celebration of easter today, I want to make a suggestion for one of the vowels. I want to encourage all of us to embody “Empty” as our “E”. There may be many other good options to choose for “E”, like encouragement, enthusiasm, energy, employability, but I believe our commitment to “empty” will naturally include these others.

Just as Christ emptied himself, denied himself, taking the form of a servant and dying on the cross for our sins. Just as Christ gave his all for you, and for me, we are charged to empty, or give our all, in return. When we do, when we empty ourselves for God, take up our cross and follow Christ in and toward God, our lives will explode with meaning and purpose and clarity and emphasis in all the right places. The Easter “A.E.I.O.U.” may suggest attentive, empty, invested, obedient, and unconditional.

The second suggestion is closely tied to our commitment to be empty. It is to deny ourselves and die daily.

In his book *not a fan: becoming a completely committed follower of Jesus*, Kyle Idleman, who is the teaching pastor of the fifth largest congregation in America, talks about “empty” in the form of dying daily. He builds this perspective from Luke 9:23 which says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” “Anyone” is everyone; you and me. “Come after me” is a passionate pursuit for someone we love. God comes after us and we too are to come after God with passion and commitment. “Deny” is to make a total surrender. We can’t “come after God” without “denying” ourselves, no exceptions. A funny tidbit he shares is about a man showing up to the gym to work out. When he gets out of his car, he carries with him to the front door a cookie dough blizzard, making sure to take one last spoon full before entering. When we commit to God, we are to “deny” those things that keep us from drawing closer to God. “Take up your cross daily” is an everyday death.

“Dying Daily” is to think of your life as a \$100 bill. Most of us think of dying to ourselves as this one big moment where we hand over our \$100 bill. I do not want to take away from that moment. That moment of salvation is the most important moment of your life. But to see following Jesus as a one-time decision is like saying after your wedding, “Now that I’m married, it’s back to life as usual.” There is more to being a husband or wife than a wedding ceremony. Instead of thinking of our lives as a \$100 bill that we give to God and that is the end of it, we give our \$100 bill to God and he accepts it but says, “This is mine, but I want you to cash it in for pennies and give one penny back to me each day.” It is a daily death.

What does it look like to die every day?

It may mean spending your lunch hour serving food to the homeless at the shelter down the street from your office or delivering meals for Meals on Wheels.

It may mean the next time you are talking with your neighbor, instead of playing it safe and keeping comfortable you bring Jesus into the conversation and invite them to come to church with you.

It may mean changing your vacation plans, and instead of going to Disney, you plan to join the mission team to Malawi or El Salvador or the Appalachian Mountains.

It may mean walking by that empty room in your house and asking God if there is someone in need that could be sleeping in that bed.

It may mean volunteering to support teaching a children's class here at church or mentoring a youth or leading a bible study.

Push pause in this moment and ask yourself what it would look like for you to "empty" yourself and "take up your cross and follow God daily."

The good news of Jesus' resurrection is a game changer for each of us. The good news of Jesus' resurrection is an invitation to move from a fan that simply associates and a follower that commits.

If today, Easter, a day in which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, does not spark something new inside us and charge us to something new outside us as well, we either do not get it or are not willing to commit to emptying and denying ourselves for God the way God calls us to.

Today is a day to lift high the cross- not as a symbol of death like it was for the Romans, but a symbol of faith and life.

Today is a day to lift our voices in singing- for God is worthy to be praised.

Today is a day of glory and victory- a day we all become champions for a cause far greater than ourselves or anything we can imagine.

Today is a day we embrace and embody the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ which proclaims God's love for us being greater than all things.

Today is the day for our eyes to be opened.

Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Alleluia. Amen.

## Prayers of the People

Peter: God of the bright and morning star,

Leen: God of endless life and of new beginnings,

Peter: God of prophecy and promise,

Leen: We praise and worship you!

Peter: For empty tombs: We give you thanks!

Leen: For disciples running with good news: We give you thanks!

Peter: For the victory over death: We give you thanks!

Leen: We pray for the church throughout the world, that we may be faithful witnesses to the resurrection, so that all may come to believe and have new life in Christ.

Peter: We pray for the people and leaders of every nation, that your boundless grace, which shows no partiality, might bring Christ's reign of peace and justice to all.

Leen: We pray for all who are despised, rejected, and oppressed,

Peter: that they may know the liberating power of the gospel and rejoice

and be glad in the day of the Lord. *(pause)* And we pray for those who weep like Mary at the tomb,

Leen: that their tears of sorrow may turn to cries of joy in the presence of the risen Christ.

*(pause)*

Peter: Loving God, we have so many people and places and particulars that weigh on our hearts and minds... We pray for all who are grieving...

*(pause)*

Leen: for all who are sick...

*(pause)*

Peter: for all who are weak...

*(pause)*

Leen: for all who are scared...

*(pause)*

Peter: for all who live in the midst of war and bloodshed...

*(pause)*

Leen: for all who are fighting on the frontlines...

*(pause)*

Peter: for all who are fighting behind the scenes...

*(pause)*

Leen: for all who are dying...

*(pause)*

Peter: for all who are caregivers...

*(pause)*

Leen: for those who feel like they have no hope...

*(pause)*

Peter: for those who feel helpless...

*(pause)*

Leen: for those who feel alone...

*(pause)*

Peter: Lord, we know there are more and that there will be more. Hear our prayers.

Leen: Almighty God, on this day of great gladness, empower us to be your ambassadors, proclaiming the good news.

Peter: Good news in our living rooms and our offices!

Leen: Good news at home with the familiar or on the road with the unfamiliar!

Peter: In this world that can sometimes feel as if it is filled with only broken hopes and dreams, help us to remember our celebrations of today where we catch sight of your kingdom come in your son, Jesus Christ.

Leen: May the truth in your word continue to guide our wilderness journeys. May the joy of your kingdom fill our homes and our hearts. May the love you revealed to us shape our giving.

Peter: May the hope of your resurrection color our days. May the promise of your spirit working in us, light up our lives. May we live to praise you forevermore.

Leen: For the resurrection is our guarantee that justice will triumph over treason, light will overcome darkness, and love will conquer death.

And all God's people say... **Amen.**

Christ is Risen!  
He is Risen Indeed!

Risen Lord, hear our cry for help –  
for those surrounded by the shroud of death  
for those covered by the mantle of dying  
for those hemmed-in by illness, visible or veiled  
hear our cry for help...  
for those weighed down with worries  
for those carrying the burden of distress  
for those overwhelmed by isolation  
hear our cry for help...  
for those who are weary  
for those who are tattered and worn  
for those who collapse from exhaustion  
hear our cry for help...

Risen Lord, hear our cry of thanksgiving –  
for the graciousness with which you hear  
for the patience with which you listen  
for the grace with which you care  
hear our cry of thanksgiving...  
for the ways you accompany us through deep valleys  
for the ways you lead us to still meadows  
for the ways you provide all we need  
hear our cry of thanksgiving...  
for transforming death in resurrection life  
for blessing and breaking ordinary bread  
for opening our eyes to recognize you  
hear our cry of thanksgiving...

Risen Lord, hear our cry for communities of faith –  
that we retain memory of being together  
that we embrace unity in the reality of distance  
that we foresee a future side-by-side, hand-in-hand  
hear our cry for communities of faith...  
that we sense purpose beyond ourselves  
that we perceive the needs of creation  
that we stretch ourselves to respond  
hear our cry for communities of faith...  
that our ways be formed by Your Way  
that our lives be shaped by Your Life  
that our love be Your Love  
hear our cry for communities our faith...