

Promises, Promises

There's a lot of promises out there ... have you seen this one on the internet? "...brilliant trick melts belly fat overnight." Do you believe that? And there's hundreds more like it. Half the products in the grocery store say they're "new and improved." I doubt that. Then there's the news - filled with politics. Most politicians promise to do the same things: fix the economy, fix healthcare, fix education, fix it all, and put a stop to politics as usual. Promises, promises ... who can believe them? I'm finding it harder and harder to believe what's presented as news. The headlines and stories are all about some great scandal or revelations and then, months later, you find out it wasn't true after all. The difference between a conspiracy theory and the truth? About six months, sometimes longer. Maybe you've had people in your life who made promises and didn't make good on them. There are some people we just don't take seriously when they make promises.

Then Easter comes along and makes the most incredible of promises. And you have to wonder, what makes them any different than all the other promises we've heard? The difference? Resurrection. Now, the empty tomb found on Easter morning is no proof of resurrection. Yet, if someone had found the body, or later even the bones of Jesus, surely they would have produced it, so eager has the world been to deny His resurrection. Nevertheless, those who were with the risen Jesus, and those whose lives have been transformed by Him, give powerful evidence that God did indeed raise Him from the tomb. So, the empty tomb has come to symbolize Christ's triumph over death and stands as God's guarantee that what He has promised to do, He will do in your life and in mine. Here's why:

1. Easter's Empty Tomb Reminds Us That God Will Go To Any Length To Win Your Heart.

One of the great temptations Jesus faced when He began His ministry is described in Matthew 4:8, *...the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'* The devil was saying, Jesus, my man, that's what you really need, a kingdom. Right? You just need followers who will obey you. I can give you that.

But Jesus wanted more than that. More than people who would follow Him, He desires people who want to follow Him. More than wanting to change our behavior, Jesus wants to change our hearts. But how do you change a human heart?

He could have used power and punishment – a lot of leaders do that. Jesus was the commander in chief of heaven's armies. He could've just compelled everyone to follow Him. But that's not His way.

He could have used blessings and rewards. Jesus did perform miracles and healings and He fed the multitudes. But when He stood to be condemned to the cross, no one stood with Him. People wanted what He had to give, but they didn't want Him.

If you don't change hearts with force and threats of hell; and you don't change hearts with miracles and rewards. Then how?

Here's how: You live better than we do. You love better than we do. You show us the ways of God. Then you go to the cross. When your light shows us that we are in darkness, when we nail you to a cross, and as you die for our sins you pray, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing. That's how you gain followers who want to follow you.

You serve us when it's costly, you love us when we fail you, you forgive us when we hurt you, and you choose to pay the price for our sins. Strangely, that kind of love has the power to change hearts. It cost God the suffering and the death of His own Son to redeem you and me from the darkness that envelops this world and our souls.

That empty tomb where the body of Jesus once laid promises that God will pay any price so you will know that you are loved, that your sins can be forgiven, and you can begin life over with a heart that is changed and that serves Him not because you have to, but because you want to. Here's another thing...

2. Easter's Empty Tomb Shows Us That God Will Transform Your Brokenness Into Blessedness

Jesus' first disciples watched their Lord be mocked and crucified in shame. By supertime, He was dead and buried. With Him, all their hopes were sealed in a stone tomb. Was Jesus just an empty promise? They must have asked, "Why, o why God did you let this happen? Where were you when we needed you most?"

We're here this morning 2000 years later because we now know that God was there. Incredibly, He was there on the cross bearing our sin, looking weak and helpless, but never was He anywhere more powerful.

God took that moment of ultimate brokenness and used it to bring blessedness - first to those disciples and then to all the peoples of the world. That's God's way. He takes our brokenness, and if we let Him, He teaches us and heals us and restores us, and then uses us to bring His grace into the lives of others who are broken.

Sometimes we don't get it until ... the doctor says "it's cancer." We lose a job. A spouse walks out. A child becomes seriously ill. We realize we're addicted. We feel trapped in a job, needing to provide for family, but hardly any time to be with family. We wake up in middle age with everything the world says we need but our hearts are empty. We come to that moment when we realize that everything we thought we could stand on - including some pro-forma commitment we made to Christ, or to church membership, years ago but have mostly forgotten or failed to keep - everything we believed would sustain us, is as empty as all the broken promises we've ever heard.

He's more than a teacher, more than a spiritual guide, and more than an inspirational historical figure. I know that some doubt. But all the evidence points to the reality of His true and full resurrection from death - Jesus is alive and He said, *Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*, Matt. 28:20. His empty tomb promises that you do not have to face life alone, limited by your strength, your wisdom, or your resources. If you will but lean on Him, He will bring His power to your problems, He will redeem your mistakes and heal your losses, and He will bring His blessing to your brokenness. One last thing:

3. Easter's Empty Tomb Promises That God Will Be There For Us ... Always

Jesus promised that He'd never leave us no matter our circumstances – even when death may close in upon us. He said: *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he die, yet shall he live,* John 11:25-26.

Maybe that's hard to believe. Many of us here have been let down by others when we needed them most. How can we be sure that Jesus won't let us down with the promises He made? Long ago the people of Israel were wondering if God had forsaken them. Had He forgotten His promises and walked away? Here's God's answer through the prophet Isaiah: *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has carried? Though she may forget you, I will not forget you. See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands,* Isaiah 49:15-16.

Mothers, what would it take for you to walk away from, quit caring for, and forget the child that was once a part of yourself? It is possible; maybe we could get our lives so messed up that even our mother would turn her back on us. God says if that ever happens, I'll be there for you. Even if your mother's love fades and she forsakes you, He won't. How does that passage in Isaiah end? *See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*

That promise has powerful significance for us, knowing what we know today: knowing that spikes were driven through the hands of Jesus when He was crucified; knowing that after His resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples and He made sure that they saw that even in His resurrected body the wounds were there in His hands... They still are. Those marks of His love and commitment, with our names inscribed, are with Him in the next world, with Him forever.

His care for you is eternal. His love is so powerful it can weather any storm, any tragedy or calamity, and outlast even death itself. ... *I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,* Romans 8:37-39.

When death takes you away from all that you love, Jesus will take you away from death. It's no empty promise. See His hands; His wounds; the price He paid to keep His promise. Look closely and you'll see your name.

Friends, Easter is not about religion. It's about a relationship - something personal; a relationship with God that leads to heart transformation. He is not a legend – He is Lord. He does not vanish into exile – He redeems to the end.

Easter is really an invitation, and I offer you that invitation now, not to join a religion or a denomination, or a church. It's an invitation to join your life to the life of Jesus...

Who truly rose from death...

Who will go to any length to win your heart...

Who will bring blessedness out of your brokenness...

And who will overcome your death and give you eternal life.