

INTRODUCTION

Even though we try to edit all our printed materials here at Green Acres, we sometimes have a misspelled word or two. But there is a collection of actual church bloopers that always make me laugh. Some are misspelled words, and others are funny because of how they are stated. Here are some of my favorites:

1. Tonight's sermon topic is "What is Hell?" Come early and listen to our choir practice.
2. Next Saturday is family hayride and bonfire. Bring your own hot dogs and guns.
3. We extend a worm welcome to those joining us today.
4. Our outreach team will be contacting people who are not afflicted with any church.
5. The February meeting of the Board will be hell in Room 104.
6. Tonight is our hymn sing in the park. Bring your blanket and be ready to sin.
7. The low self-esteem group will meet tonight at 7 p.m. Please use the back door.
8. Missionary Bertha Belch from Africa will speak tonight. Come hear Bertha Belch all the way from Africa.
9. A new loudspeaker system has been installed in our church. It was given by Mr. Williams in honor of his wife.

Yes, even churches make mistakes sometimes. But it's no mistake that you are here today. God brought you here because He wanted to remind you that He loves you and has a plan for your life. In this message I want talk about the fullness that comes from emptiness.

Usually when something is empty, it means there's a problem. An empty gas tank can leave you stranded beside the road. An empty bank account is something nobody wants. An empty glass needs to be filled. And during elections, we hear plenty of empty promises.

In this message I want to talk about three empty things in the life of Jesus, and how these empty things can result in fullness.

In our message today, we learn what happened the first Easter morning.

In John 20:1-2 CSB. "Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

The empty tomb has changed the world for millions of people. But I want to back up in the story of Jesus and talk about two more things that were in the life of Jesus that are now empty and how they can result in fullness for us.

1. AN EMPTY MANGER: So Jesus could fill the world with knowing who God really is.

Three times in Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, he recorded that Jesus was in a manger. Mary wrapped Jesus in tight clothes and laid Him in a manger. The angels told the Shepherds that the sign they should look for was a baby lying in a manger. Then we read that the shepherds found the baby lying in a manger. We have come to think of a manger as a beautiful rustic crib. But we must remember that a manger was a rough feed trough for animals.

The manger reminds us of the humble arrival of the Savior of the world. Jesus wasn't born in a beautiful palace, or even a clean hospital. He was born in the same place where livestock ate.

And every Christmas we display nativity scenes with baby Jesus in the manger. A few years ago, one of our members was kind enough to donate a very valuable hand-carved Nativity set to our church. The characters were larger than life-sized. We displayed it on Troup Highway for several years. I guess it was too valuable, because a few years ago, I was driving up and the manger was empty. Someone had stolen baby Jesus. We reported it to the police and they said they would be on the lookout for a carved baby Jesus about three feet in length.

It is the custom of some people to keep the manger empty until Christmas day, and then the baby is added. So we waited to see if whoever took Jesus would bring Him back. But, no carved baby Jesus is still missing. So the next year we replaced the carved baby Jesus with a large baby doll. That same year someone also stole one of the 7 ft. tall Wise Men. We have since added surveillance cameras for that area!

Through the years, I have laughed hundreds of times at the comedy of Will Ferrell. His "more cowbell skit" is one of the most famous SNL pieces in its history. In 2006 he starred in a NASCAR spoof called Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. There's a scene where Ricky Bobby is at home at the table getting ready to have a meal with his family. He begins to say grace and says: "Dear Lord Baby Jesus, or as our brothers in the South call you, 'Hay-zoos,' we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Dominos, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. Dear tiny, infant Jesus..."

His wife Carley interrupts his prayer to say: "Hey, um, you know, sweetie. Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd to pray to a baby."

Ricky Bobby replies: "Well, look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to 'Grown Up Jesus,' or 'Teenage Jesus,' or 'Bearded Jesus,' or whatever Jesus you want."

I don't think the writers were being sacrilegious at all. I think it was a correct observation of our culture. Millions of people love Christmas and put out manger sets, but when Christmas is over, they pack baby Jesus up and never think about Him much until the next Christmas season.

Baby Jesus really doesn't make any demands of you. He's a harmless infant. But the powerful truth we must remember is that He left the manger. The next time we read about Him, He is twelve-years old teaching the scholars in the Temple. When his parents found Him after two days, Mary said to Him, "Son, we worried about you." Jesus said, "Why were you worried? Didn't you know that I would be about my Father's business?" And He wasn't talking about carpentry. He literally said, "You should have known that I would be here in my Father's House." Jesus grew up and claimed to be Son of the Living God. He took on human flesh to teach us what God is like. This was to fulfill the prophecy of Habakkuk who predicted, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord's glory, as the water covers the sea." (Habakkuk 2:14)

Jesus left the manger to grow up and teach us that God is not some impersonal force. He taught us that God is like a loving Father who cares for us so intimately that He has numbered the hairs on our head. Jesus showed us that God is so personal that we can call Him, "Abba" which means "Daddy" or "Papa." We will continue to celebrate the incarnation every Christmas, but we must remember that the Christ child doesn't save us. The manger is empty so that Jesus could grow up and fill us with truth about our Heavenly Father.

2. AN EMPTY CROSS: So Jesus could pay for our sins in full.

Although you sometimes see statues and crucifixes with Jesus on the cross, the cross is now empty, but it is full of significance.

Each of us incur a legal and moral debt whenever we sin against our Creator. If you have never sinned in thought, word, or deed, you don't owe God anything. But if you are like the rest of us, you have sinned. Because we are sinners we owe a debt of holiness that you can never pay. None of us ever can. But Jesus, the Lamb of God paid the full price for our sins.

Last Friday night, Passover began for our Jewish friends. For centuries they have been commemorating an event that happened about 3,500 years ago. To remember the night when the Death angel passed over those families who had spread the blood of the lamb on their doorways, the Jews were instructed to kill a Passover lamb. God required that the Passover lamb be one year old, in the prime of life, and that the lamb be without blemish.

When John the Baptist first saw Jesus he yelled out, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus had no blemish on His character. The Bible says that He was tempted in every area that we are, yet He did not sin. So on the cross, Jesus accepted our legal and moral debt for sin and He paid the price in full. The Bible says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness." (1 Peter 2:24)

Jesus hung on the cross for six hours, from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. At noon that day, it became supernaturally dark. In the moment in which He bore our sins, He experienced a sinner's alienation from His Father. This is the only time Jesus didn't address God as Father. He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Imagine the agony of being

separated from the One with whom He had been in union since the beginning of Creation. Then just before He died We know He had paid the price in full because He said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Then he lifted His head and cried, “Tetelestai!” It’s one word in Greek and three words in English. “It is finished!”

He had paid the debt! In the first century when someone paid off a debt, the word “Tetelestai” was written on the debt record. And if you place your faith in Jesus and the finished work of the cross, God stamps “Paid in full” over the record of your sins: past, present, and future.

We should cherish the cross because it is the most powerful symbol of our faith. That’s why at the pinnacle of our steeple there is a nine-foot tall cross. Like many of you I watched with sadness last Monday as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned. When the Parisians watched the burning spire crash toward the ground they had emotions like we had when we saw the World Trade Towers fall on 9/11.

Cindy and I visited Notre Dame Cathedral on several occasions. We have visited many of the great cathedrals in Europe. Cindy always makes a donation and would light one or more votive prayer candles as she prayed for our family members. A couple of amazing signs of hope have emerged since the fire Monday night. When the fire was extinguished it was discovered that the beautiful altar cross was not damaged. And even after all the firemen drenched the fire with water for nine hours, all the votive prayer candles in the church were still burning.

Dr. V sent me a picture of the scene with a FaceBook post that said, “Please explain to me how you don’t believe in God after seeing this.” I don’t need any more proof myself, but I think this and every cross should get your attention. The empty cross means we can experience full forgiveness of our sins.

3. AN EMPTY TOMB: So Jesus can fill us with the hope of Heaven.

On Easter morning, Mary and the other women discovered an empty tomb. If Jesus had not come back from the dead, we wouldn’t celebrate Christmas. If Jesus had remained in the state of death, we wouldn’t even know about the story of the manger. Jesus would have been forgotten like other Jewish Rabbis during that time.

If there had been no resurrection, the cross would be meaningless. It would only be a historical reference to an instrument of execution. The cross would mean nothing more than the French guillotine, a military firing squad, or a Wild West hangman’s noose or an electric chair. But the resurrection of Jesus changed everything.

Jesus predicted that He would come back from death. In Matthew 27 we read that the same Jewish leaders who had Jesus crucified came to Pilate and said, “When this deceiver was still alive we heard him say, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So we need some soldiers to guard the tomb so that His disciples don’t come and steal His body.”

So they put Roman soldiers on guard and placed a Roman seal on the stone over the tomb. But when the angel of the Lord appeared on that Sunday morning, he tossed that two-ton stone like a Frisbee and the guards were petrified with fear. When the women arrived the angel said, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead. Jesus isn’t here. He has risen just as He said He would. Come see the place where He lay.”

The stone wasn’t rolled away for Jesus to leave. It was rolled away for all the world to see that the tomb was empty. Many New Testament scholars believe the location of the empty tomb has been found in Jerusalem. It is definitely the site of a rich man’s tomb in a Garden just a few hundred feet from a rock formation that resembles a skull. Over the last thirty-five years I’ve had the honor of escorting hundreds of people there who can step into the empty tomb and see what the women saw that first morning. The tomb is empty. But it fills us with the hope that because He lives, we too will live forever with Jesus in Heaven.

Peter communicated this hope when he wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” (1 Peter 1:3-4) The empty tomb means that the door of Heaven has been opened to everyone who places their trust in Jesus.

A number of years ago, the Barna Research Group asked almost 5,000 Americans from every state to answer this question. “How can I get to Heaven when I die?” As you can imagine they got a variety of answers all the way from, “I don’t believe in Heaven.” To the correct answer. But the #1 answer they received was. You get to Heaven by doing good and being good.”

In the 1960s we danced to a song by the Cavaliers that was later covered by Pearl Jam. “Where Oh where can my baby be? The Lord took her away from me. She’s gone to Heaven so I’ve got to be good. So I can see my baby when I leave this world.”

A few years ago, the New York Times was interviewing Michael Bloomberg, the former Mayor of NYC. He was talking about all the work he has done for gun control and to battle obesity. Then he made this statement: “I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.” When I read those words I cringed. Because one of Satan’s most popular lies is that you can be good enough to earn your way to heaven.

The #1 answer on Barna’s survey was wrong. The Cavaliers were wrong. Michael Bloomberg is wrong. You don’t get to heaven by being good.

There is only one way to heaven is to allow Jesus to be your Lord and Savior. The Bible says, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Why doesn't the Bible say, "Confess that Jesus is Lord and believe He fed the 5,000?" Or "Confess Jesus is Lord and believe that He walked on water?" It's because the resurrection isn't just a miracle. It is the THE SIGN that verifies Jesus is really who He claimed to be.

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of human history, people have feared death. That's why death is often depicted as the scary final reaper. But because Jesus met death and conquered it, we don't have to be afraid. When discussing the Resurrection the Bible proclaims, "Oh death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" Jesus removed the sting of death and He conquered the grave.

If a honeybee stings you, it leaves its stinger and then dies. A father was in the park with his young daughter. There was a bee buzzing around her and she was screaming. The dad quickly caught the bee in his fist and it stung him. The girl continued to cry. The Father opened his hand and said, "See sweetheart? That bee can't hurt you anymore because I took the stinger for you."

That's a beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us. Jesus took the sting of death in His body. Since the resurrection, death can buzz you and bother you, but Praise God, it can't sting you! Jesus took the sting for us.

Easter morning, was the day that old Death was finally defeated.

Elwood McQuaid wrote a wonderful poem about how Jesus conquered death. It's entitled "Death Meets Its Master." The poem begins with the two characters Death and Father Time meeting at the tomb of Jesus.

Father Time met pale King Death sittin' by a tomb. "Hello, old friend, I guess you're here To seal somebody's doom." "You might say that," sly Death replied. A smile slid up his face. "Inside reposes that Jesus man. Who said He'd save the race."

"Say, why you watchin' jus' one grave, With all your vast domain?
Looks like you'd be out ramblin' 'round And smitin' folks with pain." "Well, this one's somethin' special. He challenged me, they say. Said He'd rest here just three days Then stir and walk away.

"Now I'm the conqueror you know, They don't talk up to me. When I step in to cut 'em down
It's for eternity."

The poem is rather long. Father Time checks on Death the next two days and nothing has changed. But on Easter morning Father Time finds Death beaten and bruised lying on the ground. We'll pick up there.

"What happened, Death?" asked Father Time, "What makes you look so bad? I've never see you shake this way Or seem so scared and sad." Death pulled himself up on a rock A-lookin' sick an'

humble. Hung his head an' wrung his hands And Time could hear him mumble. "Was sittin' here before the dawn About to take my stroll When all at once this whole wide world Began to reel and roll. "That rollin' stone jumped off the door An' skipped on down the hill. Then everything grew dark and quiet, Seemed like the earth stood still. "I saw Jesus standin' in the door, He didn't move or speak, Just looked at me an' all at once I felt so tired and weak. "He came and got a hold on me, And threw me to the ground. Put His foot here on my neck Then took my keys an' crown. "Two angels came to talk with Him, They glistened like the sun. He said, "The plan's all finished now, Redemption's work is done!" Then the poem moves to the present day as it ends.

Time and Death met once again Off yonder by the gate. "It's good to see you," said Old Time, "I've wondered 'bout your fate." Death says, "I'm just a lowly servant now, There's little time to roam, I just push open this old gate And help the saints go home!"

The manger is empty so we can be filled with the truth about God. The cross is empty so we can be filled with forgiveness. And the tomb is empty so we can be filled with hope. To put it another way, the manger, the cross, and the tomb are all empty so that Heaven can be filled with people who trust Jesus. HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*
