

“Empty”
Philippians 2:5-11
Wayne Eberly
April 24, 2022

What gets a reaction or a comment? What stirs a person’s interest? What causes someone to become engaged and involved? During the early days of COVID, beginning on Saturday, March 14, 2020, the day after Friday the 13th, that Friday when our whole nation came to a strange and sudden stop, I began writing a daily devotion for the congregation, a practice that continued for 84 days. This morning I am going to reflect on one devotion in particular. The reason I am reflecting on this one devotion in particular is because of the response that devotion elicited. But thinking of how that one devotion elicited a response caused me to think of other responses that came during those early days of COVID, when we were all struggling to make sense of the strange time in which we were living.

I wrote about the beauty of the sunset. A friend of mine wrote a book with that title. Writing about sunsets drew many responses, as that is something that is apparently near and dear to the hearts of many. I wrote about things that were canceled because of COVID. In the spring of 2020, the Dunn’s Corners Church had a field trip on the calendar, all planned, all booked, and all prepared for. The trip was to Sturbridge Village. Sturbridge Village is a town in Massachusetts with an historic village recreating New England life in the 19th century.

Ever since we moved to Westerly, one of the founding members of our church had told me I just had to go visit Sturbridge Village. That member was Florence Madison. We didn’t schedule the trip until after Florence had passed away. Florence was an educator, a well-respected teacher in the Westerly schools. Florence had given me a class assignment, and I was bound and determined to fulfill that assignment. But through no fault of my own, we had to cancel the trip scheduled that spring of 2020. So one of my articles was titled, “Dear Mrs. Madison.”

In that article I vainly tried to explain to Mrs. Florence Madison why I could not complete my assignment. Have you ever failed to turn in an assignment? The dog ate my homework. I spilled soda on my paper. My sister flushed it down the toilet. My computer crashed. We trot out all the excuses. I can just imagine Mrs. Florence Madison rolling her eyes when I said, “Well, there was this thing called Coronavirus.” Dear Mrs. Madison must have rolled her eyes and thought, “Now I’ve heard it all.” But guess what? I’m turning in my assignment two years late, but we are headed to Sturbridge Village on Saturday, May 14th, and there is room for you to join us. I can’t wait to write a new article to Dear Mrs. Madison and tell Florence all about the great adventure we will have at the Village.

I’d like to read for you one of the daily devotions. It was about lighthouses, something near and dear to my heart.

STAYING CONNECTED IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

Practicing our faith through the times of the Coronavirus,

Day 18, March 31, 2020

“Lighthouses”

Rhode Island is a very small state, and yet because so much of our state is along the water, we have some 30 lighthouses. Built between 1749 and 1962, these lighthouses are in varied locations and each one is unique. The Beavertail Lighthouse is in Jamestown, there is a North Light and a Southeast Light on Block Island. We have the Conanicut Island and Conimicut Shoal Light, the Bristol Ferry and the Brenton Reef Light, Plum Beach and Point Judith...we even have a Sassafras Point Lighthouse, and for us in Westerly, there is the beautiful Watch Hill Lighthouse. I have enjoyed parking my bicycle at Watch Hill, being mesmerized by the crashing waves at Point Judith, even exploring inside the Block Island Southeast Lighthouse. How many vessels have been protected from danger by the lighthouses? How many seafaring souls have been guided safely home?

Many creative ideas have been born of this Coronavirus Crisis. Drive-by birthday parties, virtual concerts, posting photos of favorite scenic spots on Facebook to name a few. I heard of one suggestion that intrigued me. It was something along the lines of asking people to put a light in their window as the sun went down. I think the idea was to show solidarity in what is truly a time of darkness, an effort to let some light shine. I guess what I like about that idea is that every home that participates is literally being a Light House.

But you do not need the physical structure of a house and you do not need the glow of a lantern, a candle, or a lamp to be a Light House. Reading up on the Lighthouses I was told there are some thirty Lighthouses in Rhode Island. I beg to differ. Just in our little community that gathers at Dunn's Corners there are hundreds of Lighthouses. People gather at 221 Post Road to worship and then scatter throughout our state, spilling into Connecticut, and when we add in our seasonal folks we have friends from way down in Florida and all the way across our nation to California. Just our church. Imagine how many other Lighthouses are shining, illuminating our world, giving protection, offering a way to find a home, being a beacon, and providing hope.

Jesus said to his followers, "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:4-16 There you have it! We are Lighthouses, and Jesus wants our light to shine. And guess when light shines brightest? Of course, it is in the darkness. The Coronavirus has plunged us all into a time of deep darkness. What better time for the people of God to be Lighthouses. Thank you, dear friends, for letting your light shine.

With the love of Christ
Wayne

I hope you can see why I like that one. Each one of you is a lighthouse, and the light of Christ shines in and through you. And, as

with Sturbridge Village, you can join us as we take a tour of Rhode Island Lighthouses. We are all climbing aboard a ship setting out from Quonset Point for a three hour cruise...no, that conjures too many bad memories of Gilligan and his island...not a three hour cruise, a 90 minutes cruise to see many of the lighthouses that illuminate the shores of our state. June 11th we set sail and we would love to have you with us.

As I call to mind some of these different daily devotions, my point in sharing them is to say that certain of the devotions elicited a response. For example, one Sunday morning I was preaching about a disciple whose last name was Thomas. Thomas was a twin. When I say this disciple's last name was Thomas I do so with my tongue in my cheek. I'm making a joke. I say Thomas was his last name because everyone knows this disciple as Doubting Thomas, as if Doubting is his first name and Thomas his last. Thomas is the disciple who would not believe Jesus had risen from the dead until he saw the wounds and put his hands and fingers right into those wounds. Thomas doubted, hence his familiar first and last name. When I wrote a devotion about Thomas, I was begging for a response. I had hidden the response in the devotion. The devotion was titled, "Thomas ends up with faith"

Do you know the story of Thomas?

Once he walked with Jesus.

Unfortunately, he missed the first resurrection visit.

But there was a second chance.

The second chance came a week later.

Into the same locked room Jesus appeared.

Now Thomas was with the other disciples.

Great was the tension in that room

The Lord looked at Thomas.

How do you think Thomas felt at that moment?

Others had seen Jesus and believed he was alive.

Matthew saw and believed.

Andrew saw and believed.

Simon, also known as Peter, saw and believed.

Everyone it seemed believed.
Not Thomas.
Doubt kept him from believing.
Stating his doubts Thomas had said,

“Unless I see the nail marks, I will not believe.”
“Put your hands in my wounds,” said Jesus.

Will Thomas believe now?
In that moment, Thomas did believe.
The good news is he moved from doubt to belief.
Have we moved from doubt to belief?

Faith is being sure of what we hope for.
All who call on the Lord will be saved.
In a room with locked doors, Thomas believed.
Thomas said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.”
His doubt disappeared and he worshiped the Lord.

How had I hidden the response in the devotion? If you take the first letter of each word, you end up with this: “Doubting Thomas Ends Up With Faith.” Many of you got it, and you let me know you got it. It is fun to not only share something, but to get a response.

Which brings me to the particular devotion I want to share with you today. I wrote it just days into the isolation which was so strange and disconcerting. We were glued to the television. And one image made an overwhelming impact on me, and on so many of you. That image was of emptiness.

STAYING CONNECTED IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

Practicing our faith through the times of the Coronavirus,

Day Three, March 16, 2020

“Emptied”

Emptied...The Roman Coliseum

Emptied...The Broadway Theaters

Emptied...The arenas that hosted March Madness

Emptied...The Louvre

Emptied...The shelves that held toilet paper

Emptied...the shelves that held paper towels

Emptied...the shelves that held hand soap

Emptied...the shelves that held sanitizer

Emptied...The schools that are home to our precious children, teens, and college students

And then...

Emptied...our houses of worship.

At this particular moment, it seems our lives are filled with emptiness. And so we feel empty.

At this particular moment, I hold up to you one whose life truly was filled with emptiness. And yet this one whose life was filled with emptiness lived a life that was anything but empty. This one lived a life that was full. This one lived a life that was vibrant. This one lived a life that was beautiful. This one lived a life that was a blessing.

In a compelling description of our Lord, the Apostle Paul writes:

"Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he **emptied himself**, taking the form of a servant..."

Christ Jesus **emptied himself**.

Christ Jesus took the form of a servant.

Those who study the scriptures closely note that Paul seems to be borrowing a hymn that had become well-known within the early

Christian community. Facing their own times of hardship, facing their own times of persecution, facing their own times of testing, facing their own times of challenge, the early Christians knew what it was like to be empty. Instead of bemoaning the many ways their lives were emptied, the Apostle Paul, himself acquainted with suffering, called on the early Christians to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, to have the same mind as Christ Jesus.

In a world filled with the emptiness of empty shelves and empty landmarks, empty schools, and even empty houses of worship, what an amazing opportunity for people of faith to explore how we can have the same attitude, how we can have the same mind as our Lord Jesus Christ, how we may empty ourselves as servants, how we may empty ourselves for the sake of others. As he did so often, Jesus offers us a powerful paradox. "Whoever seeks to gain life for themselves will lose it, but whoever loses their life will gain it." (Luke 17:33)

In this time of the Coronavirus, I pray that we will not be defined as a people who emptied the shelves of our supermarkets.

Instead, in this time of the Coronavirus, I pray that we will be defined as a people whose lives were emptied as we poured themselves out for the needs of others, sharing kindness, compassion, joy, and love.

In this time of the Coronavirus, I pray that we will be defined as a people who have the same attitude as Christ Jesus...

"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

With the love of Christ,
Wayne

I received two responses to that daily devotion titled Emptied. One was from a guy I went to school with, a really nice guy named Kenneth. Back in the day everyone called him Kenny. Kenny and I graduated together from high school in 1979. I have not seen Kenny since we graduated. I moved away.

Now, some forty years later, I write an article for our church, I also post that article on social media, Kenny from Hanford reads the article, and he responds. Something in the article about empty led Kenny to write back. This is what Kenny, my old high school friend wrote to me that day, that day so early in the crisis we know as the Coronavirus. Kenny wrote,

“Thanks, Wayne! And if you would allow, maybe one more? Still empty... the tomb where He was placed!”

Oh my goodness, Kenny! You nailed it. How could I talk about empty without mentioning the empty tomb? I am so thankful Kenny responded to my devotion that day. But Kenny was not the first person who responded that day. I got two responses about the devotion focusing on empty. I told you about Kenny’s response. About twenty minutes before Kenny wrote to me from the great state of California, where he is a college professor, a young woman from the state of Washington had also written to me. She almost sounded offended. She wrote, “I thought for sure you were going to mention the empty tomb!” That was it. That was literally all she wrote. It wasn’t a long note. Brief. Direct. She got right to the point. “I thought for sure you would mention the empty tomb.” I got that note from a young woman in Washington and I read it several times. Each time the smile on my face grew. By the fourth or fifth time my face was beaming. And my heart was warm. Oh, my heart was warm and glad and overflowing with gratitude and love. That young woman who lives in Seattle, Washington, that young woman who took time to make sure I should never forget the empty tomb, is our daughter Carlee. Our daughter knows the story is not complete, the story is never complete, in fact the story is literally empty...without the tomb that was

once and will forever be empty. So on this Sunday after Easter, this Sunday after we celebrated the resurrection, I have just two things to say to you.

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I don't think it will take you long to figure that out. M T

Now let's go and tell the world the good news that Jesus is not in the tomb. The tomb is empty. And he is alive. Hallelujah and thanks be to God.