

Are You Empty?

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[0 : 00] Now, as part of our evening worship, we do also have a spotlight, and the spotlight sometimes is on different things that we do in the church, different either organizations that we're involved in or something that we want to highlight.

But over these few weeks, we've been trying to focus on people as our spotlights and people within the congregation and to have them share a little bit about what it means for them to be a Christian in their lives.

So this evening, Laura, who's got a heavy shift this evening, she's singing as well as sharing a little bit, is going to tell us, I hope, a little bit about what Christ means to her in the context of this theme. So Laura, thanks for doing this. It's nice to have you. Hi, everyone. So actually, the question that Derek sent me was slightly different than the sermon question.

It's, are you filled? And the sermon question is, are you empty? So I've come at it at a slightly different angle, maybe. But anyway, it should answer the same thing. So yeah, just as Derek said, for those of you who don't know me, my name's Laura Watt.

[1 : 13] I have been in St. Seas for about two years now, which is crazy. And I've been living as a Christian for about nine years, which is even more crazy since my first year of uni.

I'm married to Roger, and I was a teacher, and now I'm working in education policy in Edinburgh. So that's just a wee bit of background. So the question, am I filled?

That's the question I want to just briefly talk about. Well, I don't actually think that's a really simple question, and I don't think there's a straightforward answer, and maybe you would disagree.

But I'd say yes and no. So I'll start with the no. Am I filled on a human level? I don't think I ever am going to be.

So being a Christian and having a relationship with the living God, it doesn't mean that I'm all of a sudden satisfied with life completely. I still want more and more.

[2 : 15] I still want a cushed-ear job. I want to be skinnier. I want to work part-time so I can do more. I want a wood-burning stove, please. And more seriously, I want children.

I want to be able to provide enough. I want to be a better wife, a better sister, a better friend, a better daughter.

I want the world to be a better place, don't we all? For the terrible things that we all close our eyes to stop. And in some sense, I think that that's biblical because it shows that as humans, we're all seeking something more, aren't we?

That life here actually will never satisfy us. It will never fill us completely long-term. So when you become a Christian, you don't reach enlightenment where you suddenly feel at peace with the world.

In fact, being a Christian can often make your life harder. However, the other side of the coin, I'm sure you'll be glad to know, am I filled? Yes, absolutely.

[3 : 20] And the other side of that is that as a Christian, no matter how unsatisfied with life it can be, that Jesus brings fulfillment like no other.

He is the one in my life who brings a baseline meaning, a baseline purpose, and an ultimate hope that this life isn't actually all there is.

And all of these things that I look to to give me fulfillment, they come and go. It sounds depressing, but they will all eventually fade or die.

My career will end, death will separate me from my husband, my family, my house and my possessions will one day be left behind.

My health may leave me, we don't know. But if Jesus is telling the truth in His word, that He's the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and that we can come to Him for true satisfaction

in Him, that is so freeing and I've found that as a Christian for the past nine years that although there's ups and downs and you always want more, you're never really fulfilled, the baseline joy and fulfillment that Jesus brings is like nothing else I've experienced.

[4 : 48] Because it means that the one that I'm putting my hope in will not die, he will not fade, and he will not be taken away from me. There's a really famous Bible verse that I'm sure a lot of you know and it says, the thief only comes to kill and destroy, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

So yes, because of that peace and joy that God brings, I am filled to an extent in life now, but ultimately the good news of Jesus promises that in the next life I will have life and have it to the full, unspoiled, secure and fuller than I will ever imagine because I'll meet God face to face.

So that's just a tiny little part of what I feel about, am I filled in my life? But if you have any questions please just come and speak to me after.

Thanks. Okay, so this is the fourth of a series of six sermons which were designed for people who are skeptical about the Christian faith.

And so this evening themes are questions, the unbelievable themes.

[6 : 15] Are you hurting? Last week are you empty as tonight and are you hopeless as next Sunday evening? God, Easter Sunday evening.

Now really what I could do is I could probably please you all very much by just sitting down and saying, well actually, Laura was a living testimony to what I'm going to say.

And she probably said it a lot better than I will. So we could actually pack up shop and just sing another song and go home. But we're not going to, okay, because I'm going to back up what Laura said, okay.

Laura explained very powerfully and simply her faith and explained a lot of the things really that I was going to mention and also used a Bible verse that I'm going to use which is going to be on the screens tonight.

So there's been no talking together. We didn't confide one another and nail that Bible verse. But it's obviously a good one that God wants us to hear.

[7 : 18] But it's a big question in people's lives is fulfillment, isn't it? And what constitutes a fulfilled life. Now there's all the kind of usual things that we talk about when we talk about a fulfilled life, isn't it?

A great job, health, good family, love and sex, chasing maybe the dreams that we have, the ambitions that we've always had, maybe a big house, big garden, big bank balance, excitement, whatever it happens to be, there's lots of things that we want to help to quantify what is a satisfying life, living life to the full.

And then it may be different for different people. And I think for a lot of us, and a lot of people, wealth plays a big part of that in the Western society, maybe not just as an end in itself, but because of maybe what wealth enables us to do.

And the freedom that it gives us maybe to chase the dreams that we look to have that give fulfillment. Maybe we're slow to express it and we wouldn't express it necessarily.

But many people are envious of wealth and the freedom that wealth gives to follow our dreams. Happiness and riches and riches and happiness are a pretty strong combination.

[8 : 48] But you maybe feel that that is harsh and unfair and that you have a much higher moral concern in life for fulfillment.

You know, it may be the desire to change the world, to make it a better place, to serve people, to work in noble fields, to try and progress the world and the world in which we live, finding fulfillment and meaning and purpose in that good end.

And if you were to define emptiness, which we're looking at, are you empty in a kind of human term, if we did a poll of that this evening, maybe we would have different ideas of what it means to be empty or what you would think brings emptiness into our lives.

Some of the more popular ones maybe would be poverty in opposition to wealth, suffering or relational isolation, loneliness, huge issue for people in their lives, which makes life for many people feel meaningless.

And again, but if you're taking the kind of mirror opposite of what we've looked at with a desire to change things and the desire to do good, but feeling tremendously powerless to do anything, that you're just a cog in a huge wheel and that nothing really is changing no matter how much I want to

see change in this great world.

[10 : 30] So emptiness can be that feeling of powerlessness and poverty and illness and loneliness. And that maybe if we did a straw poll of people, that's what they would possibly consider would be some of the characteristics of an unfulfilled and kind of empty life that may be experienced.

But what I want to do this evening just for a little while is suggest a different narrative, a different perspective on life and on emptiness inside.

And I want to suggest to you that if you make pleasure or wealth or material possessions or love and sex or even a just cause, if you make any of these things the measure of fulfillment without God at the center of your life, they will never bring fulfillment and true meaning to your life and it will never offer life to the fool.

Now as Laura was saying, I don't want us to be naive and to think that the Christian life is an easy life or is always absolutely fulfilled, but there's this core reality at the very bottom of it.

And I want to do that by taking a character from the Bible for a few minutes and thinking about her, and we read about the crucifixion this evening and you may have been focusing on the fact that Jesus was on the cross and there's a story that surrounds Jesus.

[12 : 12] But I want for a moment to think about Mary, Jesus' mother. Now I know it's Easter and we usually talk about Mary at Christmas, but we're just going to just turn things upside down a little bit this evening, okay?

We're going to talk about Mary, the mother of Jesus at the cross and her life because to many people in the world, if you took that story out of the Bible and just had it as a story, Mary's experiences and Mary's life would really kind of summarize a life that was just empty.

It was an empty life for her in many ways, according to many people's standards. We only read a short and tragic section of Mary's experience where she experienced a searing loss of her firstborn who was killed right in front of her.

It was prophesied at the beginning of her life that a sword would pierce her own soul. She saw the death of her son, her firstborn son that she'd lived and was close to for a third of a century, brutally murdered on the cross.

Maybe for many people that would be the epitome of emptiness, losing someone so close. But let's just briefly fling a few thoughts about her life as well as we go through it.

[13 : 53] In terms of trying to judge or trying to imagine how the world would judge Mary in terms of a fulfilled life or a life of emptiness, she was born into a society that didn't really know or respect women's rights or equality, so there was immediate difficulty for her then.

She became a pregnant teenager, an unmarried pregnant teenager. Conceived her child in dubious circumstances, at least to those around her, that very much left her on the outside the object of suspicion of being a moral and loose woman.

Very difficult in the environment and the society in which she lived. She gave birth to her son in a bayar, cowshed or the equivalent of the Middle East, in a strange town far away from her home. When they took Jesus, her son, their firstborn to the temple when he was eight days old to offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, they could only give the sacrifice of the very poorest of families two pigeons.

They had nothing, abject poverty in their lives, difficult personal circumstances, rootless, foundationless with her new family, because they had to then flee for their lives, didn't they?

[15 : 28] Because of the threat of persecution and death to her young child. She became a refugee in a foreign country, the foreign country of Egypt, and we know that story, we hear that story at Christmas time, but we don't think much about it, how difficult it was for them as a family.

They wouldn't have known anyone, they didn't have the language, they didn't have any money, they went with a new baby. Everything must have seemed so desperately strange for them.

Not much fulfillment there, emptiness. And things don't really get much better for Mary. She lived a life and faced a life of family trauma.

She had potentially, we know at least she had six other children, four boys and two girls and maybe more. So she had a big family, they were poor.

When Jesus was 12 years old, they lost Him in the city of Jerusalem for three days, a harrowing and frightening experience for any mother and father. And at some point, we don't know when, but at some point after that, her husband dies and she was left a widow, no income support.

[16 : 44] The means of income in her family gone in terms of the wage earner, the employed person, and the love of her life taken from her.

And we presume she would have still been fairly young at that point. And Jesus who was, we presume again, the one who earned income for the family, leaves the house at 30 years of age to begin a public ministry.

And he became infamous in her lifetime. And her world at that point was changed forever. She loved Him.

She followed Him and she saw that some people loved Jesus and some people hated Him. Even her own family were confused about who Jesus was and the claims that He had made.

So there was great turmoil in her life with all that she knew and all that she didn't know about who this Jesus was, her son.

[17 : 47] She traveled with him, she heard his teaching. She knew he was unique. There was much spiritual uncertainty though in her experience. And then we come to the passage we read.

She had to watch him suffer in such a great way, being arrested, falsely accused, brutally beaten, nailed to a cross.

Abject humiliation of her son naked on the cross, a blinding grief of a mother seeing her firstborn taken from her.

And the one she knew to be different and she knew to be her savior, but how this end? This wasn't what she expected.

This wasn't what she believed would be the outcome and she, at the cross, powerless to change it in any way.

[18 : 46] And so visualize that scene at the cross, a maelstrom of darkness, atmosphere of evil, a noisy crowd screaming victims around Christ, the rough Roman guards and this small woman alone.

It's a great picture, isn't it, of emptiness? Someone absolutely empty. Everything having been taken from her.

And a totally unfulfilled life, a life of poverty, hardship, loss, unparalleled grief losing her husband and now brutally losing Jesus.

She had absolutely nothing. She was completely empty. There was nothing left in her life. Or is that the case? I would like to suggest this evening that she was far from empty.

I wouldn't like in any way to minimize her grief or minimize the pain of what she went through or the battles she still had to face.

[19 : 47] But I would argue she is far from empty. The testimony of the Bible and the wider teaching and promises of Jesus to those who follow Him can very much be applied to Mary, his mother.

And we can also, from our own experiences as believers and as Laura shared with us, understand and know the fulfillment that we have by being a Christian.

So I want just to say two things about her. She had an amazing life song. By all the world's standards, there was no fulfillment there.

There was an absolutely empty life. But she had an amazing life song. And secondly, I would argue she was rich beyond measure and therefore fulfilled.

She had an amazing life song. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to just go back to the very beginning of the gospel to what we would normally look at maybe at Christmas time, to read the song that she sang, the words that she was given by God when Jesus was born.

[20 : 59] And it sums up her life. It sums up her faith. Even at that early stage, Luke chapter 1, 46 to 55, very famous part of the Bible, Mary's song.

And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me, holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich empty, away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abram and His descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors.

[22 : 02] So we have, this is a kind of summary of the faith of Mary. I know it was at the beginning of her life with Jesus, as it were, but it's something that never left her that great faith that she went on to display in life.

She rejoiced in God, her Savior, even though, even in these early days, there was much that the world would look at and say, this poor kid's getting no hope.

There's nothing going on here in her life. She's not got any future. And she was rejoicing in God, or she had great joy, because she knew that God was her redeemer.

She understood that because she trusted in God for her salvation that she was blessed and she would be recognized as such over many centuries, and that has been the case.

Sometimes unwisely recognized, overly recognized, but as one among many in the Bible, we need to recognize and rejoice that she had that wholeness, that blessedness that came from putting her trust in God.

[23 : 20] She knew that the living God was battling for her. The mighty God was on her side, was her advocate. I don't believe for a moment she understood everything that that meant, as it often doesn't for us.

But she knew that she was on the side of life and victory and forgiveness, because she had put her trust in God, God who cared for this empty, unfulfilled, ordinary teenage bride, teenage mother.

And she was one who found real fulfillment in her God. She knew where her riches lay. She recognized that people who were looking for fulfillment and riches and other places, God sent empty away because they had no time for Him.

But she recognized and saw that her trust was not in wealth or in power or material things because they left everybody empty.

God sends them empty away. So she recognized where fulfillment came from and where the emptiness came from. And she understood from the song we see, she understood the mercy of God for her and in her life.

[24 : 41] The promise of the Messiah was to be fulfilled in her Son. Again, I don't know how much she knew about how that would be fulfilled. I'm sure the cross was just not how she expected her Son to become the fulfillment of the promise of being the Messiah.

But as she looked back, she recognized the cross being the fulfillment of God's mercy outworking itself in her life. Her sins were forgiven.

And at the cross, if you remember the story we read, there's a little bit of job done, Mary, job done. Jesus' job was done on the cross. He died in her place and became her redeemer, but her job as his mother was done as well.

And she entered into a new relationship with him. You know that lovely bit in the passage that we read where Jesus from the cross, as it were, hands over Mary to John, the beloved disciple, and say, John, he is your mother, and Mary, he is your son.

[25 : 50] His her job as his mother was ended, and he becomes in a much more real way at that point her Savior and not her Son, as it were.

This song that she has speaks even almost prophetically for her of the fulfillment and the blessedness and the joy and the fullness of her life, even though it certainly didn't look like that in the Scriptures that we have.

And we also know that she was rich beyond measure, in biblical terms, I mean, but not I don't mean financially, but she was rich beyond measure.

In Acts chapter 1, verse 14, this is the only other reference to Mary after the Gospels. It said that the New Testament church after Jesus had risen from the dead, and the disciples had moved from being terrified, fearless, locked in an upper room, and then they met with Jesus, the risen Savior, and they began to turn the world upside down with this message of a Savior, Jesus Christ.

They all gathered together, they joined together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. So there's a real transformation even at that point in the life of Mary.

[27 : 17] She has become part of the core foundation in many ways of that New Testament church, and she understands much better, but still probably not great in terms of understanding in these early days of a risen Savior and of the church being founded on this great truth of Jesus died for her sins and who rose to reveal the victory over death and sin and the grave.

So she had met with him, the risen Savior, no longer her son in ordinary terms, but with the risen Savior who is both God and man, and who is the Savior of all who come to him by faith. And therefore she knew as Laura spoke about in that verse, John chapter 10, verse 10, life to the full. Jesus talks about all the deception and all the misunderstandings of where fulfillment comes. He says, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and may have life to the full. She understood that, and she knew that in her experience of meeting with the risen Savior, found by saving grace, one of the few in these days that were transformed to the degree of being able to turn the world upside down, as we're told. She therefore also came to know the reality of second, I'm just giving you one or two verses here, 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9. She understood this, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sake He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich.

[29 : 10] She understood that wealth that she had spiritually because Jesus was willing to be emptied and willing to take the guilt and the failure and the sin that separates us from God in order that we might be forgiven and enriched so that fulfillment comes ultimately from knowing Jesus and from being in relationship with Jesus, that's the greatest riches that there is for us.

So that Mary certainly wasn't empty. She was full because she knew life to the full. Now as Laura was saying also, our experience isn't naive.

We don't think that for a moment that when you become a believer, the battles, the struggles, the doubts, the fears, the difficulties, the opposition and sometimes the sadness isn't there.

But we recognize where our fulfillment lies. We recognize that Jesus Christ and our identity in Jesus Christ is what gives us fullness and what gives us hope and what gives us forgiveness and what gives us identity and meaning and purpose as children of the living God.

And that's since separates us from that and means that everything else is like trying to capture the wind unless we find fulfillment and meaning in our Creator and our God and our Savior.

[30 : 47] So I just want to leave you with a couple of questions. First, are you finding in your life that the pursuits you're following are leaving you empty, unfulfilled and questioning?

And that's a question that we can always ask ourselves and ask other people. You know, is living for the weekend? Living for relationships?

Pursuing wealth? Frustration and not being able to change things? Being unlucky in love? Being dissatisfied? When the party is over and the music has stopped?

The nagging questions of who I am and why I'm here and what's it all about? Sometimes especially as you're getting on in life and the days of blossoming have kind of gone a little bit.

You're just getting older and wondering what it's about. What is the song of life that you're singing?

What is bringing you fulfillment and where will you find that fulfillment?

[31 : 59] And I'm suggesting you'll never find it. You'll never find it in anything other than a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

So I would ask you to take time, if you're not a Christian, to consider the claims of Jesus. One who says that he is the only way to life, as we saw also earlier this morning, who is meaningful and without whom there is no true purpose.

It's like chasing shadows are temporary and empty. And there isn't, for any of us, a more important question and I would ask you to consider it with some urgency because we believe it's a matter of life and death about dealing with the sin and our lives that separate us from God who's the God of life and ultimately introduces us to separation and death, not just in this life but eternally from him, which is unspeakable.

So please do consider these issues and I thank you for being here and for taking the time to listen. And we are praying for you and appreciate so much you're taking the time to join us.

We'll just pray briefly and then we'll sing together one more song before we have tea and coffee.

Father, we ask and pray that we would understand that the Bible as it is the living word of God speaks to us about real people and real situations and real lives and real changes and real foundations and real transformation.

[33 : 45] And we know that the early church was transformed by meeting with the risen Savior, very physically meeting with the risen Savior but also by faith.

And we know that by faith we also have experienced that as Christians and we want to share that with others because of the great change and the fulfillment and the hope even in difficult times and

in times we don't understand, times that seem dark like Mary's time on the cross which was dark and we do go through times of darkness but we ask and pray that we would understand and know the love of Jesus and the sovereignty of God for our good and the great promises of hope for this life and also on into eternal life when we know and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. May that be where we find our fulfillment and our hope and our future. Amen.