

Dear Friends,

I used to know a lovely Christian lady who was bedridden, but could see the church from her bedroom window. Every Sunday she would count the people arriving for the morning service and thank God for each of them. 'I like to see my church full' she would repeat over and over again with a big smile on her face.

Don't we all? It's so nice to see a church, *our* church packed with worshippers.

We just can't help ourselves - we live in a culture of targets and chronic busyness, we feel compelled to fill every unoccupied minute, to fill up all our empty space. The more efficient and productive we are, the better we feel.

Do you know what is one of the fastest growing industries in the UK? The self-storage industry. There are plenty of reasons why people put their belongings in storage, but almost half say they simply have no room for the items at home - the house is absolutely packed, the garage is full, there is no space for the car. I've read about a woman who lives in a shared house in London, but keeps her clothes in a storage unit. She goes there every morning to get dressed for the day, as if to her own walk-in wardrobe.

We work too much and we buy too much, but that's only part of the problem. There's also the mental clutter, all the 'should haves', 'could haves' that keep us awake at night, the emotional clutter that is weighing us down - 'No one really cares about me', 'My partner doesn't appreciate me', 'I'm terrible at making friends...' This kind of clutter is annoying, unhealthy, but at least it helps fill the void in our life and there's nothing worse than feeling empty.

Every year on Easter morning we hear the story of the empty tomb. It's a thought-provoking image, a powerful symbol, but not much more. This year is different. This Easter is different. It's as if someone had pushed the pause button on our lives. The tomb is empty and so are the streets, the shelves in our shops, our favourite restaurants and our churches. The emptiness of the tomb has spilt over into our everyday life. It can't be ignored anymore, there's no way around it, we need to face it head on, embrace it and see what it has to say. There is no need for ministers to preach this Easter, because the emptiness speaks for itself and we are faced with all sorts of questions: Where is our risen Master this Easter? Is there a place for our witness, our faith in a coronavirus world? How do we become carriers of God's peace, joy and grace, how can we spread hope while self-isolating?

Let's see what John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, found in the empty grave. Our gospel for today says that 'he saw and believed'. The man who had seen Jesus perform miracles, cast out demons, raise people from the dead, who had heard God's voice speaking from heaven comes to faith in the stillness, emptiness of Jesus' tomb. He looks at the empty wrapping linens remaining in the exact place and shape of the body of Jesus and goes from a 'maybe' faith to a full faith. The tomb doesn't confound or terrify him, for him that empty space is not nothing, it becomes a place of rebirth, the beginning of a spiritual adventure. Easter, like any new spiritual adventure,

like creation itself, starts with emptiness. God invites John to enter that holy emptiness, a space where his true self can separate from the death clothes we are wrapped up in. He invites us to do the same. Let's think about it for a moment - what destructive feelings, attitudes does God want to free us from this Easter?

The Chinese philosopher Dao De Jing writes: 'We join spokes together in a wheel, but it is the centre hole that makes the wagon move. We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable. We work with matter, but emptiness is what we use.'

We are drawn to visible, tangible things but it is emptiness that makes us, Christians useful to God's kingdom - when something is empty, it is ready to be filled, ready to receive Him and His Easter message. If there is any emptiness in our lives this morning who knows, God may just step into us at that very place. Let's not be afraid to enter it together with Him.

Amen