

## **Story, Scripture & reflection questions for worship on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2021.**

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, Easter Sunday, this story will be part of our study package.

As you read this story, I encourage you to reference it with previous few study packages you received this Lenten season. During Easter, think about re-reading them and going through the questions again, to see what fresh insights might emerge for you from having walked this journey.

### **“Sheldon in the Sanctuary”**

**- By Janaki Bandara**

He remembered sitting in this pew in a whole other time ... feels like a lifetime ago now. Then too, he had his post it notepad and pen. He had taken up the practice of writing a gratitude post it every day when he had given up drinking. Drinking had allowed him to give up thinking about suicide after his little girl died.

Every emptiness requires some replacement. Nature abhors a vacuum, they say.

That lifetime ago when he sat on that pew it was a sunny early spring morning. One of those mornings when the frost kissed the grass before melting away under the gaze of morning sunshine. He had just moved to *The Hopper* from a bunk bed at the shelter. *The Hopper* was far from heaven; a rooming building which the locals joked offered room for rent “by the hour if needed.” His room was sparsely furnished, but it was a space that was all his own. His clothes were clean, thanks to the laundry facilities at *The Vineyard Church*, and that faraway morning, his first morning on this pew, he woke up early enough to hear the church bell ringing, signalling the beginning of worship. He lay in his bed for a few minutes, stretching, examining the cracks in the ceiling and just being thankful for the clean smell of laundry detergent, and the privacy of his own room. Then something, some secret Spirit nudging at him, made him get up, wash up, dress up, and walk over to the church.

The big arched doors facing King Street were closed, but as he pushed against them they opened easily in welcome. The organ was playing something rousing, the people were standing and singing, their backs to him. Quietly he entered, climbed the few steps up to the red carpet, and took a seat in the back pew, on a soft red cushion. The song name and number was on the overhead screen, but no hymn book was near him. A few more lines of song proceeded before the organ stopped. A short brown lady, gowned in a big white robe read from the Bible, he cannot even remember what right now, and then everyone sat down.

He didn’t remember the details of the sermon that morning. But he did remember the feeling. Someone nudged him and handed him a bulletin while the short brown pastor lady talked in a sing-song accent that sounded vaguely Caribbean. He felt bathed in a soft warm lighted feeling. Just warm enough to melt the cold of life’s harshness away, but not so warm as to make him hot or make his armpits sweaty. He breathed deeply, taking in the images in the stained glass windows ... there Jesus as a baby, there Jesus preaching as a young boy in the temple – his parents coming up to him to check and see what he was doing ... there Jesus on the cross ... there Jesus resurrected – the stone rolled away from the empty tomb.

Sheldon’s own life of faith came back to him in snapshots: church with his grandmother who always smelled slightly of mothballs and menthol in her Sunday best. The best lunches followed, and there was usually cake. Sunday was comfort and peace, a warm bed, a happy tummy. Those memories connected with the feeling he had in church that Sunday.

Suddenly, the people were singing again, and standing ... Sheldon stood too, on that unique autopilot that church brings of up and down calisthenics. The short brown pastor bustled up to him, handing him a hymn book turned to the right page to sing, grinning up at him and saying “Welcome. It is so good to have you here.”

And he could feel the welcome, not just from her, but from the whole setting: building and community alike, seeming to echo warm welcome off the very walls that surrounded them.

The tune, it turned out, was familiar – something absorbed into his vocal muscle memory from church with Gramma? He found himself singing, carried along by the light, the warmth, the gathering of voices, the magnificence of the organ. His heart felt so good within him – better than it had felt in a very long time – and as he sang, he was able to name the feeling pouring, gushing, overflowing from his soul: thankfulness ... deep, abiding thankfulness. He wrote on his post it when he sat down “I have no money, but I thank you and God for today and all its blessings.”

Now Sheldon sat in the very same spot. The lights were off. No organ music. No people. No soft red cushion. It was past dusk, so the windows were not illuminated brightly. For weeks now he sat in this spot, around the same time every evening to write his gratitude post it. Listening to the empty building creak. Hearing the occasional fire truck or ambulance driving past. In its emptiness the building was very echo-y. He always had lots of advance notice that someone was coming – enough time to leave his seat, (for he had come to think of it as his own seat) his seat in the pew, quietly slipping downstairs to hide himself away.

You see times had changed, not only for Sheldon, but in the world. He had stayed at *The Hopper* for quite some time. It wasn't the Ritz-Carlton by any measure, but it was affordable on his cheque, and it was stable. It helped him regain a measure of stability of his own. But then, along came the COVID-19 pandemic. And with it a weird uptick in the real-estate market in Cambridge. Now the owner of *The Hopper* wanted to sell to the highest bidder. A building full of semi-itinerant indigents (for that is how the residents were seen by most) was less marketable than an empty building. So Sheldon found himself with one week's notice in the mid-Fall of 2020. He probably could have fought the eviction. But he knew the ways of the moneyed world well enough to know he would lose that battle. Sheldon had come to learn the hard way that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.

On one evening of his week of eviction notice, on a whim he tried the front door of the church, leaning into it as he had that long-ago Sunday morning, when it had opened so easily in welcome. Lo and behold, it opened for him. He slipped in. Nobody was in the building, and he was able to explore. He had lived in the neighbourhood long enough to know the people at St Peter's Place, the elders residence building behind the church, would get quite ornery, calling the cops at the drop of a hat on anyone they saw lurking around. Not-In-My-Backyard was alive and well even around the church. So he was careful to resist the urge to turn on lights, and kept his cell phone flashlight shielded from the church windows as he looked around.

All were welcome before, but he wasn't sure the same would apply now. No matter how much nature might abhor a vacuum, empty spaces in human hearts and minds had a way of becoming ornery and blind to the needs of those from whom life had stolen privilege. In his case, the thief was grief.

Pandemic. Mid-Fall 2020. He had heard the church bells ring for two Sundays, so he knew Sunday would be busy. But the basement of this building was HUGE. “Gi-normous” as his daughter would have said – combining gigantic and enormous into a word that could hold her scaling of things. The big auditorium was empty but heated. The stage even had a couch on it, along with lots of other items – awaiting the day when a church yard sale could happen again, he guessed. He felt sure he could quietly hide out here.

“Do it dad.” He heard the voice of his dead daughter whisper. “It will be like camping indoows.” She had died before her r's got to be pronounced as r's ... Sheldon and his wife used to make rice-a-roni just to hear Annabella say “Oh my favouwite suppew: wice-a-woni.”

Winter was coming. Winters had been hardest on him since his little Annabella had died from early childhood leukemia. Grief tore him asunder. He could not work. He could not cope. He had hit the bottle so hard that the bottle hit him back. At his lowest point, he had been homeless and had gone to *The Bridges* for shelter.

This church had more square footage than *The Bridges*, with roofs so high in the fellowship hall and sanctuary that two more floors could easily have been inserted ... all this space unused, but for a masked worship service on Sunday, attended by twenty to thirty souls, who could not even sing the way they had on that glorious Sunday morning he remembered so well.

It was different today. Now, this Sunday as he sat on the pew, the pandemic had been with the world for more than a year. He remembered from his childhood and his Gramma, Easter Sunday was a big day for church people. For Annabella, Easter Sunday had meant an egg hunt, and a search for the Easter “wabbit”. St Peter’s had been open for only six Sundays in this whole time. The rest of the time it had stood empty.

Except for Sheldon, who alone had the benefit of the shelter the building provided; who alone from the evictions from *The Hopper* had landed on his feet in a manner of speaking, who alone sat in this sanctuary on Easter morning.

Every emptiness requires some replacement. Nature abhors a vacuum, they say.

Sheldon sat in his spot at the back pew, and wrote on his post it his note of gratitude this Easter Sunday “I have no money, but I am thankful for the roof over my head, the warmth and the safe place – the blessings provided here by God, today.”

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### **Luke 24:1-9**

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women went to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared [to finish anointing the body]. And they found the [large, circular] stone rolled back from the tomb, but when they went inside, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed *and* wondering about this, suddenly, two men in dazzling clothing stood near them; and as the women were terrified and were bowing their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why are you looking for the living One among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise [from death to life].” And they remembered His words, and after returning from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven [apostles] and to all the rest. [The Amplified Translation]

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. Have you ever encountered a grief so profound that it shook you to your very core? How do you imagine your most profound grief comparing to the grief of the disciples who saw their leader Jesus crucified? Where does your faith fit in your encounter with grief?
2. When the women go to attend to the dead body of Jesus, they find an empty tomb. What does the empty tomb mean to you? Is it about the dead, or is it about the living?
3. When expectations are dashed, even expectations for seeing a dead body, feeling perplexed and even terrified might be normal. What can help transform these feelings in our encounter with the unexpected so that, instead of feeling perplexed and terrified, we feel hope and faith? How can we share this transformation with others?
4. What does the empty church building mean to you? During this time of pandemic, when the church has at mostly closed, how have you thought about that space? Is it primarily with the grief of not being there? How is your mindset coloured by the opportunity of resurrection?
5. When you think of Jesus, resurrected, leaving the tomb empty, what hope does it inspire in you? How can you share the hope of the empty tomb within your neighbourhood and within your world?