

March 27, 2005
Easter Sunday
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

“Undisturbed Grave Clothes”
John 20:1-9 (NIV)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Do you realize that the sole purpose of these nine verses of important Christian history is the arrangement of grave clothes? Obviously there is something extremely important about these grave clothes. Peter and probably John are told by Mary, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" Peter and John take off running to the tomb. John, being a younger man, out runs Peter and arrives first. He bends over and peeks into the tomb. His reward for winning the foot race is that he's first to see the strips of linen lying there but he did not go in. As soon as Peter arrived, true to his impulsive nature, he goes right into the tomb. Now John follows and he can see some more. His eyewitness account is that "he saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen." Then we are told, John "saw and believed." What was so wonderful about these grave clothes that when John saw them he believed? What did the arrangement of the grave clothes have to do with him seeing the body was not there, and causing him to believe?

First of all the orderly fashion in which the burial linens were lying ruled out Mary's first suspicion that the body had been taken. If the body had been taken there would have been no burial clothes at all, for they would have been taken with the body. But there is something else about the linens and their arrangement. The whole language seems to have been carefully chosen to suggest that the physical body of Jesus passed through the undisturbed grave clothes. His "physical body had passed into a spiritual and 'glorified' Risen body without disturbing the grave-clothes, which simply settled down on the ledge within the tomb in their original position." (*Macgregor*, quoted from *The Beacon Bible Commentary*). The first three evidences of the Resurrection are the stone removed from the entrance of the tomb, the missing body of Jesus and the undisturbed grave clothes.

When John writes that Peter "saw the strips of linen lying there" he means that they were lying precisely where the body had been laid, remaining in the exact position Jesus' body

had occupied. Not only did he see strips of linen lying there, but the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head as well. It was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. This can mean one of two things. Either there was a separate linen that was wrapped around Jesus' head or there was a separate folded linen upon which His head had rested. This linen was "folded up by itself." In other words, when Jesus' head was removed it caused the clothes to collapse upon themselves and shrink. They had not been manually unfolded, it had not been removed from the head, but the head had been removed from it. None of the grave clothes were undone, none of the folds were disturbed, no change in their position. They had simply collapsed. The natural body had dissolved within the wrappings and merged with the spiritual body in a transformation that all believers will one day experience as well (when our bodies will be changed and reunited with our spirits on the last day when we experience the resurrection of the dead). Grave clothes could not prevent this transformation of Jesus. God had been there and John knew it. No wonder John "saw and believed" – believed what, Mary's assumption that the body had been taken? No, he saw and believed that Jesus had been resurrected, even thought up to that point they did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead, as v9 points out.

In the early nineties the ABC news show 20/20 had an interesting segment on the shroud of Turin. If you were completely out of touch at that time and have not heard of the shroud of Turin, let me tell you that it is supposed to be the cloth that Jesus was buried in. And on this cloth is an imprint of the person of Jesus. It is now housed in a cathedral in Turin, Italy. Several years ago an international team of scientists, consisting of Christians, Jews, Moslems, and non-believers, set about to prove or disprove the story behind this ancient cloth. The results of their findings were published in an issue of National Geographic magazine.

The interesting thing to me about the 20/20 story was an interview that they had with one of the scientists, an Air Force colonel who was a specialist in laser technology. He openly admitted that he began the project not only as a non-Christian, but as a person who was openly anti-religious. I relished this opportunity, he said, to debunk what I considered a childish myth. Geraldo Rivera asked him: Now that you have spent four years on this project what is your response. His response not only shocking, but it was shocking that 20/20 allowed it to go on the air. He said: After four years on this project, I now fall upon my knees and worship a resurrected Christ. (By: *Brett Blair*) John "saw and believed."

We started this Lent off with a message on the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had called Lazarus, who was dead for four days, back to life. If we were to compare the resurrection of Jesus with that of Lazarus we would find these differences: Jesus arose on His own power; Lazarus did not rise on his own but by the power of Jesus. While Jesus left behind His grave clothes, Lazarus (John 11:44) came out of the tomb, bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told the others, "Unwrap him and let him go!" Lazarus returned to the same life as before; Jesus did not. Lazarus came back to a body with the same weaknesses and sickness as before; Jesus did not. Lazarus died again and awaits with us a better resurrection; Jesus can never die again. Jesus calls us out of the darkness and slavery to sin to give us a new life if we will believe. He

promises us help for this life and hope of Eternal Life in His Kingdom. This is why the undisturbed grave clothes are so important...they are evidence of the Resurrection and the Resurrection is central to the Christian faith because it is evidence of our forgiveness and hope.

There once was a man named George Thomas, a pastor in a small New England town. One Easter Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying a rusty, bent, old birdcage, and set it by the pulpit. Several eyebrows were raised and, as if in response, Pastor Thomas began to speak. "I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me, swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, "What you got there son?"

"Just some old birds," came the reply.

"What are you gonna do with them?" I asked.

"Take 'em home and have fun with 'em. I'm gonna tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a real good time."

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?"

"Oh, I got some cats. They like birds. I'll take 'em to them."

The pastor was silent for a moment. "How much do you want for those birds, son?"

"Huh??!!! Why, you don't want them birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They don't sing and they ain't even pretty!"

"How much?"

The boy sized up the pastor as if he were crazy and said, "\$10?" The pastor reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The pastor picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, setting them free. Well, that explained the empty birdcage on the pulpit, and then the pastor began to tell this story.

One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting. "Yes, sir, I just caught the world full of people down there. Set me a trap used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!"

"What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, I'm gonna have fun! I'm gonna teach them how to marry and divorce each other. How to hate and abuse each other. How to drink and smoke and curse. How to invent guns and bombs and kill each other. I'm really gonna have fun!"

"And what will you do when you get done with them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, I'll kill 'em."

"How much do you want for them?"

"Oh, you don't want those people. They ain't no good. Why, you'll take them and they'll just hate you. They'll spit on you, curse you and kill you!! You don't want those people!!"

"How much?"

Satan looked at Jesus and sneered, "All your tears, and all your blood." Jesus paid the price.

The pastor picked up the cage, he opened the door, and he walked from the pulpit.

Let me tell you a true story that happened some time ago: A young boy's father died in a car wreck when he was twelve years old. He read it in the newspaper before anyone got word to him to tell him about it. When he saw that picture of the family car smashed-up on the front page of the newspaper... and read that his dad had died in that accident, he was thrust immediately and painfully into the shocked numbness of deep grief.

Strangely, one of his very first feelings were those of guilt. He had remembered how some months before at a family picnic he was showing off with a baseball. At one point he got careless and threw wildly; it hit his dad in the hand and broke his thumb. The young boy felt horrible. He said to himself, "What a terrible son I am! I have caused my dad great pain."

It seemed that was all he could remember after his father's death—the pain he caused his dad. Finally, the young boy went to see his pastor and told him about the deep feelings of guilt and about breaking his dad's thumb.

The young boy... well, let me tell you in the boy's own words, he said: I'll never forget how my pastor handled that. He was so great. He came around the desk with tears in his eyes. He sat down across from me and said:

"Now, Jim," that was the boy's name, "you listen to me. If your dad could come back to life for five minutes and be right here with us... and if he knew you were worried about that, what would he say to you?"

"He would tell me to quit worrying about that," Jim said.

"Well, all right," the minister said, "then you quit worrying about that right now. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," he said... and he did.

That minister was saying: "You are forgiven. Accept the forgiveness... and make a new start with your life." The young boy did make a new start. And today, many years later, he is the pastor of a 9,000 member church: St Luke's in Houston. The young Boy? James W. Moore, the author of over 30 books on Christian living.

That's Easter. The Risen Lord comes back to life... and assures the disciples that they are forgiven.

- Peter had denied his Lord three times.
- Thomas had doubted.
- All the disciples had forsaken Him.

But, Christ came back, forgave them, resurrected them. He came back to share with them... He comes today, this morning, to share with you the joy, the encouragement and the forgiveness of Easter.

(Adapted from the sermon "Jesus & Mary Magdalene" by James W. Moore.)