

Empty Grave Clothes

John 20:1-10 with 1Corinthians 15

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 4-4-2010

Introduction

The story is told of Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. John Watson camping out in the wild. The first night they set up their tent and fell asleep. Some hours later, Holmes woke his friend up and said, “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson replied, “I see millions of stars.”

“What does that tell you?” asked Holmes.

Watson pondered for a minute, and then said, “Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo.

Horologically, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it’s evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.”

Then, after a pause, Watson said: “Well, Holmes, What does it tell *you?*” Holmes was silent for a moment and then he said. “Watson, you imbecile, it means that someone has stolen our tent.”

This morning I want us to put on our detective hat and do a little sleuthing. Why were the grave clothes lying there? What shape were they in? Why was the face cloth separate? Why was it folded? Where was the hundred pounds of spices? Why didn’t the disciples grab the clothing and sell it on eBay for a fortune? I’m sure there are other questions that could be answered, just like Watson did so expertly. But then we are going to move on to the second part, the practical application, because we don’t want to miss the most obvious thing about this whole event, and that is that we must deal with a personal, risen Savior, not just a doctrine about Him. But really, both points are important. One leads to the other.

In verse 8 we find that John was a pretty good detective. With one look inside that tomb, it says that “**he saw and believed.**” He took it all in, and came to a remarkable conclusion – that Jesus Christ had really risen from the dead. What did he see that made him come to that conclusion?

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I. Putting on the detective hat – what does the clothing in the tomb signify? (John 20:1-10)

A. The clothes reminded them that there really was a death.

First of all, the clothes would have reminded them that there really was a death. This was not a bad dream that they would wake up from with a sigh of relief. A death had occurred. And the blood stained grave clothes were there to remind them of that fact. There is abundant evidence of the death of Jesus. Even secular testimony of the first century testifies to that. And to Muslims who deny that Jesus ever died, we would insist that there are over 100 references to the death of Jesus in the New Testament alone. And there are secular references to His life and death. The apostle was witness to the spear that penetrated his heart and the blood and water that flowed out. Jesus was wrapped up tightly in grave clothes that were wound around and around his body. Those who wrapped up His body would have had this tangible reminder that a death had happened. That's an important clue in his believing. And if you do not believe that Jesus died as a substitute for you, you have no hope of salvation.

B. The undisturbed clothes showed that His body had not been stolen

A second thing that these undisturbed grave cloths demonstrated is that the body of Jesus had not been stolen. The first anti-resurrection theory was the stolen body theory. If you want to read about it sometimes, it's recorded in Matthew 28:13. After the Roman guards gave clear evidence of the resurrection you find the Jewish leaders bribing them to change their story and to claim that the body had been stolen. But all the facts stand against it.

First, the presence of a Roman guard made it extremely unlikely that anyone could get a body out of the tomb without being noticed. Second, there was the death penalty imposed upon any soldier who fell asleep or who let a prisoner escape. I think they would have taken their jobs seriously. Third, the time and the noise and the dispersal of the fragrance would have been very noticeable if the would-be robbers had succeeded in sneaking past the guards, opening the heavy stone door and getting inside. Jews prepared the bodies for burial by wrapping long linen clothes around and around the body, and in between each layer of these cloths special very aromatic spices would be spread out. Look at chapter 19:39. **And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.** That's an enormous amount of spices. So we have a big problem here if the body was stolen. Who would be crazy

enough to go to all the trouble of unwrapping the body from its hundreds of feet of linen if their goal was to quickly sneak it past the guards? It doesn't make sense. It would be much easier to carry the body encased in its wrapping. Also, if His body had been unwrapped, the spices would have been far more conspicuous than the clothing itself. In fact, the scattering of clothing and spices all over the place would have alerted Peter and John to the fact that something disastrous had happened. But what they saw led John to believe in a resurrection. Putting two and two together I have come to the conclusion that all John saw was the clothing which means that nothing had been unwrapped. It appears that the spices are still within those windings. It's still in the shape of the body with the spices still hidden within the layers of the windings. That would be impossible for any grave robber to pull off. So all of those reasons prove that the body had not been stolen.

C. It proved that Christ's resurrection was different from all previous resurrections (cf. John 11:44). It also proves that He was not merely resuscitated from a swoon.

The third thing those clothes proved was that Christ's resurrection was different from all previous resurrections. I want you to flip back to John 11 and look at verses 43-44 where we have as vivid and as stark a contrast as it is possible to have with regard to grave clothes. John 11. This is a description of the resurrection of Lazarus. John 11, beginning at verse 43: **"Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he who had died came out *bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth.* Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'"** Do you see the remarkable contrast? Lazarus was bound hand and foot and was not able to get out of the sheets that were tightly wound around him. Why? Because he did not have an immortal body. Jesus was the first to rise with an immortal body that could pass through doors, and obviously in this case, to pass right through the clothing. Lazarus' body was revived, but it was not glorified. It was a body still subject to the laws of physics and unable to pass through those grave clothes like Christ's body did.

Why is this important to state? Acts 26:23 says, **"that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead..."** If Lazarus had an immortal body, then Jesus wasn't the first to rise from the dead. The bodies of Lazarus and Christ's were quite different. Lazarus' body would die again. John 12:10 shows the chief priests plotting to put Lazarus to death again.

But everything I have said here also gives a blow to the theory that Jesus was simply resuscitated. Some call it the swoon theory. They say that

He blacked out and was assumed to be dead, but later regained consciousness within the tomb and was able to get Himself out. Well this blows that out of the water because there was a change in the body itself. Somehow Christ's body was so physically changed that it passed through those clothes. And yet the same body was able to pick up clothes. Verse 7 says, **and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself.** Jesus was the only one in that tomb prior to these disciples and so *Jesus* picked up that cloth and laid it aside. The main pile of grave clothes prove that this was no mere resuscitation, and yet the folded napkin showed that Jesus rose with a body, and He folded the face cloth and put it away. In fact, later in chapters 20 and 21 you see Jesus able to eat and drink, able to touch and be touched. But the point is that this resurrection was obviously different than any previous happening. Lazarus had to be helped out of His grave clothes. Jesus did not.

D. The absence of the body and the presence of the clothes help to inform us about the nature of the resurrection body

But fourthly, the absence of the body and the presence of the clothes help to inform us about the nature of the resurrection body. It is different from His old body in that it can pass through these clothes. In fact, if you compare this account with Matthew 28 you will discover that Christ passes through the tomb walls before the door is opened. The angel opened the door not to let Christ out, but to let others in so they can witness the miracle that had already happened. In Luke 24 Christ comes through locked doors. There is a change in relation to the physical laws that govern the body.

And yet it was the same body. Why is that important to notice? There are books coming out of the hyperpreterist camp that deny that resurrection bodies have flesh and bones. But I want you to turn with me to Luke 24. Somehow this body has flesh and bones; it can eat; it can be touched; and yet it can defy the laws of physics in ways our old bodies cannot. Luke 24:39-43. **Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, 'Have you any food here?' So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence.**

There are some who insist that while our resurrection bodies will be similar to Christ's resurrection body, that our resurrection bodies will have no connection whatsoever with our old bodies, and that they are certainly not bodies of flesh and bones. Well, Christ says right here that His new body

was made of flesh and bones, and yet in verse 36 those flesh and bones somehow were able to pass through solid doors. And so these grave clothes help to define the nature of the resurrection body, and help to define what our body will be like at the Second Coming. It has changed properties, and yet, the fact that there is a missing body from these grave clothes also shows that it is the old body that is changed, not just a new body unrelated to the old. So even the grave clothes help to correct some false theologies that are coming out today. You need to put on Dr. Watson's sleuthing cap and come to some logical conclusions.

E. It was sufficient evidence that John “saw and believed” the promise that he had previously not believed

Finally, all of this was sufficient to make a believer out of John. John 20:8 says, **“Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed.”** He saw what? He saw grave clothes without a body. He saw the folded napkin. He saw that none of the spices had been disturbed. He saw that this was a miracle and could not be explained by anything else than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

So that's what the grave clothes teach. But it would be easy to stop there and miss the important applications. So let's put on Holmes's hat, and ask the question, “What practical difference should this make in our lives?” For this section I want you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 15.

II. Making practical application of our conclusions (1 Cor. 15:12-19). According to Paul there are at least six implications:

In this chapter Paul gives us six life-changing implications that come from believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you think that doctrine is not practical you need to read Paul's epistles. All of Paul's epistles show the practical ramifications of doctrine. So let's read verses 12-19 of 1 Corinthians 15

1Cor. 15:12 ¶ Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

1Cor. 15:13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

1Cor. 15:14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.

1Cor. 15:15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up — if in fact the dead do not rise.

1Cor. 15:16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen.

1Cor. 15:17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

1Cor. 15:18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

1Cor. 15:19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

If you analyze these verses carefully you will see that they answer six of man's deepest longings. Most of these are stated in the negative because Paul is showing what would be the case if Christ were *not* raised. But in verse 20 Paul reverses that and says, **But now Christ is risen from the dead....** That means that each of those negative implications has its positive counterpart. And it's those positive counterparts that I want to look at.

A. Destiny. Our lives can have significance beyond the tomb (vv. 12-13,16,18)

And the first positive implication is that our lives can have significance beyond the tomb. This is the whole longing for knowing our destiny. And the reason Christ's resurrection has that implication is that we could have no resurrection apart from Christ's resurrection. Paul says that if Christ is not risen, we will not rise, and if someone denies that we will rise, then he is also logically denying that Christ has risen. That is how bound up our lives are with Christ's. And so to put this in positive terms, Christ's resurrection guarantees that our lives will have significance beyond the tomb.

Isn't that a longing of every human heart? Every religion tries to deal with this longing. You can think of the tombs of Egypt and ancient religions. But even people who have abandoned religion have had this urge for their lives to last. They have built huge monuments so that at least their name would endure beyond their lifetime. Ecclesiastes tells us why. It says that God has "**put eternity in their hearts...**" We are not satisfied to think that all that we have is this short fleeting time upon the earth. That would just seem so meaningless. Men want to know that they will have joy throughout eternity. But the only way to know that is through Christ.

B. Success. Our calling can have success (v. 14)

Verse 14 gives a second implication – that our calling (or our jobs) can have success. I think one of the longings of the human heart is to be

able to say at the end of one's life, my life counted for something; my life was a success. We don't want to get to the end of our lives and say, "I wasted my life." Verse 14 says, "**And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain...**" That was Paul's calling – it was to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But he said that everything his life had been preoccupied with would be for nothing if Christ was not risen. It was knowing that Christ was powerfully working through him that kept him going even when the going got tough.

Many of you are not preachers, but if you look at the last verse of this chapter Paul applies that to every one of us. He says in verse 58, "**Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.**" He is saying that when you really understand the resurrection of Christ and His living presence with us that it profoundly affects all the work that we do. There is an energizing motivation in knowing that Christ's resurrection power can make our work count for eternity. Only Christ can guarantee that the giving of a cup of cold water in His name will in no wise lose its reward. It is only if we are resurrected that laying up treasures in heaven even matters. Only Christ's presence can transform a communion meal from a boring funeral to a joyful sense of communing with the risen Savior. If you are working only because people expect you to work, you don't have the motivation that can give your calling power and success. Paul wants us to do all that we do through the power of the risen Lord and with the conviction that what we do is not in vain. "Your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

C. Security. Our faith is well founded; there is someone we can trust absolutely (v. 14,17)

A third implication that Paul gives is stated twice. Verse 14 says that without Christ's resurrection, your faith is in vain. And verse 17 says, **And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile.** What is the opposite of having vain or futile faith? It is having well-founded faith – it's being able to trust in someone. And so this deals with security. One of the longings of the human heart is to have someone that we can trust absolutely or implicitly; to have someone who won't let us down. We all desire to have friends who won't let us down and whom we can count on through thick or through thin. I think God made us to be that way all the way back in the Garden of Eden. But sin has made men and women unable to trust and unable to be vulnerable. People are often afraid of being vulnerable. We have all been hurt and let down by friends and loved ones. But the resurrection of Christ means that there is someone who not only understands us and sympathizes

with us, but also is someone whom we can trust; someone who will never let us down. If you have never put your trust in Jesus, then do so this morning. He is a risen Savior who is with you to the end. He said, **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** So the third implication of the resurrection of Jesus is that we have a well-founded faith – we have someone whom we can trust absolutely.

D. Meaning. There is truth and meaning; there are absolutes (v. 15)

The fourth longing of the human heart is the longing to have absolute truth that we can bank on – especially in this post-modern world where everything is anchorless. Many young people are being taught (and many of us were taught) that there is no absolute truth. They are much more likely to say, “That’s true for you and not for me.” Or “I won’t impose my beliefs on you.” And that post-modern thinking has infected people’s attitudes toward the Bible. Some people are willing to accept parts of the bible but not all of it. This past Wednesday I was talking with a man who wanted to believe the statements in the Bible that God loves him, but he didn’t want to believe the first few chapters of Genesis, certainly didn’t want to believe Joshua and Judges. But Paul says, “No. You can’t have it both ways.” There is only one absolute in life, and it is the Bible. And if part of the Bible is wrong, then none of it can be trusted. Limited inerrancy is impossible.

So what does this have to do with the resurrection? Well, if Jesus didn’t rise, then verse 15 says, **“Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise up.”** He is saying that if this one part of his message is wrong, you can’t trust anything he says, because he claims to be giving the inerrant word of God. If you can’t take the Bible at face value in what it says about the resurrection, then the Scriptures can be made to say anything that you want them to say, and they will lose their authority and they will lose their guiding power. Paul is saying that you have to accept the whole Bible or the bible becomes a false witness. That’s exactly the implication. Your faith is in vain if you believe the Bible makes mistakes. But the flip side is that when you believe the whole Bible to be an inerrant and reliable guide, it gives meaning to life; it gives an anchor to life; it gives a criterion by which you can judge all truth claims. The friend I was talking with on Wednesday said, “Phil, your problem is that you are engaging in Bibliolatry – you are worshipping the Bible rather than Jesus.” And I said, “No, the Bible is the Word of Christ, and to insult the Bible is to insult Him.” Paul says that without the resurrection you don’t have absolute truth.

E. Reconciliation. Our sins are forgiven (v. 17)

The fifth implication that Paul gives is in verse 17: “**And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!**” What is the opposite of still being in our sins? It is to have our sins forgiven and wiped out. Isn’t that the longing of every human heart – have a clean slate? No one likes it when others hold grudges against them. When you have things that are not forgiven, it eats away at you. And what is true of the horizontal level is even more true between you and God. Every human heart has a longing to be forgiven and to not have the books thrown against us on judgment day.

Christ’s resurrection was the proof that God had accepted the sacrifice of the cross as payment for our sins. Christ’s resurrection was the guarantee that all who put their faith in Christ will be forgiven. Have you trusted Christ for your salvation?

F. Satisfaction. We are to be envied; our lives are significant (v. 19)

Sixth, verse 19 says, “**If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.**” What is the opposite of being pitied? It is being envied. Since Christ died and is risen, we are to be envied since our lives are so significant and full of meaning, and blessing, and the presence of God. If Christ is not risen, then living for Him and doing what He commands is a great delusion. Why suffer for Christ if this is the only life that *we* live? Yet Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “**For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.**” Paul is saying there that we aren’t to be pitied. It doesn’t matter how much we suffer or are deprived. Our lives are to be envied; our lives have significance. During this short life we are laying up far more glory and riches in heaven than anyone can even dream of down here below.

Paul says in reality it is the unbeliever (whose life seems put together and who seems to need nothing) – he is the one who is to be pitied. And the reason he is to be pitied is that one day he will be raised to judgment and everlasting torment.

Conclusion – like Jesus, we too must leave certain things behind

But I want to conclude with one last implication. The last implication is that like Christ, we too must leave things behind that we can never take with us. He left His clothes behind and was clothed with something far more

glorious. 1 Timothy 6:7 says, “**For we brought nothing into *this* world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.**” And yet, what are the things that we are most preoccupied with? They are the things that can only last for this lifetime. Right? What a disappointment it will be for those who get to heaven with no treasures laid up because they have spent all their time preoccupied with things like Christ’s clothing, houses, cars, money. On the other hand, if we have an eternal perspective, all of those things can be used in the service of Christ, and by doing so, we can lay up treasures that will last for all of eternity.

It is important that we have an eternal perspective on life – that we look at life through the lenses of the resurrection. It makes a huge difference what you believe on the resurrection, doesn’t it? But it makes an even greater difference on who you know. Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior? He left behind what we will all one day have to leave behind, and He entered into the glories of heaven as we will, if our trust is in Him. Don’t be like Dr. Watson and miss the most important clue of all. Here the most important clue is that all of us will one day die and after this the judgment. And if you do not believe in Jesus like the apostle John did, you will never find the fulfillment of these six longings. But those who do trust in Jesus will realize that He came that we might have life more abundant. Trust Jesus as your Savior. Amen.

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 - C. It proved that Christ's resurrection was different from all previous resurrections (cf. John 11:44). It also proves that He was not merely resuscitated from a swoon.
 - D. The absence of the body and the presence of the clothes help to inform us about the nature of the resurrection body
 - E. It was sufficient evidence that John "saw and believed" the promise that he had previously not believed

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 - B. Success. Our calling can have success (v. 14)
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