

Empty Grave Clothes

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Scripture: John 20:5–9

Have you ever been to the funeral of a family member? Can you remember all the emotions that you felt?

Imagine the emotions of Jesus' friends and followers as they saw their Savior and Lord taken captive. Imagine how John and Peter must have felt as they witnessed the interrogation of Jesus. Imagine what John experienced as he saw his beloved Master being nailed to the cross, dying a shameful, torturous death. There hung his best friend, his confidant, his Master.

Then it was all over. Jesus breathed His last. He was buried. What waves of sorrow and depression must have washed over these disciples! Their Master was dead. They had hoped He would usher in His new kingdom. They had thought that He would be the one who would redeem Israel. But now, everything was over—their hopes, their aspirations, their co-ministry with Him—all was history.

Now, try to imagine the disciples' emotions, as they became aware, on Easter morning, of Christ's resurrection. He is alive again! He is not dead! He is indeed the Messiah!

The reason the disciples were so depressed and fearful after Christ's death is that they did not understand the Scriptures, and they forgot Jesus' testimony that He would rise again (John 2:22). Therefore, Christ lovingly

provided wonderful evidence of His resurrection for them. The grave clothes that Jesus left behind were part of this evidence. Let's focus in this sermon on the instruction these empty linens provide for us in John 20:5–9. In examining the theme, "Empty Grave Clothes!" we will look at three thoughts: resurrection by fact, resurrection by faith, and resurrection by foreshadowing

Resurrection by Fact

It is early Sunday morning, the third day since Jesus had died so dreadfully on the cross. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, Mary the mother of James, and other women approach the grave of Jesus. They love Him and want to add some spices to His body. Though it is dark, they notice that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. What has happened? Has someone pillaged the sepulcher? Did someone steal Jesus' body? What should they do?

Gathering courage, the women enter the tomb. In the dim light, they notice that Jesus' body is missing. Probably around this time Mary Magdalene rushes out to find the disciples. Soon she finds Peter and John. Panting for breath, she blurts out her interpretation of what she has seen: "They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid him."

Peter immediately decides to take a look, and John goes with him. They break out into a run. With such urgent matters to attend to, they cannot remain at a calm walk. There is only one thing on their minds. They must get to the tomb to see what has happened.

What must have gone through their minds as they ran? What had happened to Jesus' body? Could someone have stolen it? Certainly He could not be alive. They were

not gullible enough to get their hopes up. But, how could they be so sure?

John outruns Peter. Why does Peter run slower? Some have thought that Peter was simply older and slower. Others stress that his conscience still troubled him about his recent denial of Christ, and this may have slowed him. We don't know for sure, however, so it is best not to draw any speculative conclusions. Regardless, the fact that John outran Peter indicates John also desperately wanted to get to the grave as soon as possible. He did not want to take the time to wait for Peter.

Soon John, panting heavily, arrives at the sepulcher. It is true: the stone is rolled aside! Why? He stoops down to look in. He spots the linen grave clothes, still intact, lying there (v. 5). The Greek word here for seeing (*βλέπω*, *blepo*) merely indicates that John noticed the clothes. He does not inspect them, but just sees them lying there. Respectfully, he hesitates, no doubt instinctively remembering that those who come in contact with the dead are declared ceremonially unclean. So John does not enter the sepulcher.

John notices that Mary Magdalene's testimony had been wrong. He sees that the body of Jesus has not been taken, for then the linen wrappings would have been taken with the body. This would have made transportation of the body much easier.

But, you say, "The plunderer could have pulled off the grave clothes and taken the body." Surely you would agree that if this were the case, the linen clothes would have been torn and scattered about. In addition, the 100 pounds of spices, mentioned in chapter 19:39, would have been scattered about. But instead, John sees the linen clothes lying there, with no evidence of any disturbance (v. 5).

Moments later, Peter arrives. As usual, Peter does not hesitate. Brushing by John, he goes right on into the tomb. Perhaps he feels his uncleanness so strongly combined with such a longing for Jesus that he does not hesitate to take the risk of becoming ceremonially unclean. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, he sees something quite astonishing. The Greek word here for seeing is θεωρέω (theoreo), from which we get the English word “theorize.” It implies that Peter scrutinized the grave clothes carefully. Literally, he *observed* them. He observed something unusual that caught his attention. The parallel passage in Luke 24:12 says that after Peter saw the linen clothes “laid by themselves,” he left the tomb “wondering in himself at that which was come to pass.”

What does Peter see? Our text says in verses 6–7 that he sees “the linen clothes lie, and the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.” He observes several things. He sees the linen clothes that had been around Jesus’ body; and he sees the napkin, or face cloth, wrapped together separate from the body clothes. No doubt he also sees the blood stains on the clothes.

You may be wondering: “Why does the text draw so much attention to the grave clothes and how they are arranged? Does this mean that Jesus, after He pulled off the grave clothes, put them in neat piles?”

If we study the text carefully, we don’t get the impression that that is what the text has in view. If the text were trying to show that Jesus neatly piled up His clothes after He rose from the dead, you would expect it to say something about neatness. But neither our text, nor the parallel passage in Luke 24:12, says anything

about neatness of organization. What then is the text saying?

To fully understand the significance of the position of Jesus' grave clothes, it helps to know something about Jewish burial practices. Every society has its own distinct mode of burial. Greeks and Romans often cremated the dead. Egyptians often embalmed the dead. Some cultures buried tools, money, and food with the dead in a coffin. Jewish burial was different. How did they do it?

Look with me, first of all, at the previous chapter, in verses 39–40, where we are given a short description of how Jesus was buried: “And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. [Aloes was a powdered wood that had a nice fragrance. Myrrh was a fragrant gum that was mixed with the aloes.] Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.”

The Jews normally wrapped the dead person's body in linen, while they mixed in dry spices. The body was wrapped in this way up to the shoulders, leaving the neck and head bare. Then they separately wrapped the head with a face cloth, sort of like a turban, but covering the entire head. This is why, when Lazarus was resurrected, John 11:44 says, “He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin.” Once the body was wrapped, the Jews put the dead body face up, without a coffin, in a tomb. The tomb was generally cut from rock in the Judean and Galilean hills. Then a large, flat, round rock was rolled in front of the entrance to seal it. It appears, then, that Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus did this with Jesus' body, late Friday afternoon.

So what does Peter see in the grave clothes that causes him to gaze with amazing wonder? Peter recognizes that the body of Jesus is gone. Luke says he saw the “linen clothes laid by themselves.” The body is gone. How can that be! The clothes are here, but the body is absent! Peter also observes that the grave clothes are essentially undisturbed, that is, except for the head cloth. It seems that the head cloth was still wrapped up, as if it was around a person’s head (like an empty cocoon), but was separate from the linen clothes. This is strange! Peter leaves the tomb, marveling and wondering about what has happened.

Peter’s mind is still in turmoil. Though he is a believer in Christ, light has not broken into his soul. He does not have clarity to see the wondrous truth of Christ’s resurrection—at least not more than its fact. But we know that soon after Peter left the grave, Christ met privately with him in a personal restorative encounter that, reverently speaking, was too sacred for human words. Then Peter’s darkness was dispelled. His burdened conscience was healed with the balm of Gilead.

We can experience something quite similar still today. Though we trust that Christ is the Messiah as a fact and believe in Him, our minds and hearts can be so clouded at times that we cannot embrace the full implications of that reality. The promises of the Word seem unreal and far from us. We remain like this until Christ again comes to us, shines with His glory into our souls through His Word and Spirit, and heals our broken hearts.

So we have here facts that testify of Jesus’ resurrection. The grave clothes are still lying undisturbed in the tomb. The only unusual thing is that the body of Jesus is absent. It is as if the body of Jesus has disappeared. The linens that had wrapped the body are

still lying there, and the head napkin has fallen apart from the body linens. Jesus is no longer in the grave. This could not have been staged. No one could have taken the body out.

Young people, just imagine for a moment that you were one of the disciples. Your whole world had just fallen apart when your Master died the shameful death of the cross. You are afraid that the authorities are going to round you up and finish you off next. Then you get the news that your Master's grave has been pillaged. You rush over, and see the grave clothes lying, but the body is missing. What would you think?

We have seen the response of Peter. Luke says that he marveled. Now what about John? We see his response in our second point:

Resurrection by Faith

Before Peter leaves the tomb, John enters. He too sees what Peter saw. The Greek has a third word here for seeing (ὁράω; horao). This word means to perceive and take special notice. It has a focus on intellectual activity and concern. It indicates that he went beyond Peter in contemplating the implications of what he saw.

The text indicates a progression from John first noticing, then Peter observing, then John perceiving. There is an important distinction between these words. This perceiving of John fits perfectly with what accompanies his perceiving. Verse 8 says that when John went into the sepulcher, "he saw, and believed." Spiritual light arises in his soul through the gentle, powerful work of the Holy Spirit. As a result he has spiritual sight to behold with the eye of faith.

What does John believe? He believes that Jesus has risen from the dead. He rightly concludes that Jesus' body

has not been stolen. Peter had probably also concluded this. But John perceives more. He believes that Jesus has arisen in a wonderful way. His body has somehow come right out of the grave clothes. It has been transformed in a mysterious way to a new form of existence. Jesus is alive and well. John does not know where Jesus is, but he believes that Jesus is alive and begins to grasp its saving ramifications.

That means that Jesus did not die like a martyr. He must have planned His own death. That's right, Jesus had said that He was going to die and rise again. Why hadn't he remembered? But, why would Jesus have died and risen again? Ah, yes, hadn't Jesus said that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"? (John 3:14–15). John begins to perceive what has happened, and he embraces the truth wholeheartedly. He is awestruck as the light of the gospel begins to shine in his mind.

Something similar to this happens when the Spirit sheds light into the soul of a believer, after a time of darkness. The glorious light of the gospel grips our entire being, and thrills us as we perceive and believe it. It may be the truth of the atonement, God's providence, the resurrection, or Christ's intercession. Such light is thrown on gospel truth by the Spirit that we perceive the truth in a fresh, wonderful, new way. Perhaps it takes our breath away and makes us feel weak. We stand dumbfounded before the truth, basking in the glory of Christ. We perceive and believe the truth, and it makes us free, and bold, as it did with the disciples.

But why did John not believe earlier? Verse 9 tells us that: "as yet they knew not the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead." This means that they did not

have a good, Spirit-applied, working knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures that predicted Christ's resurrection.

But where does the Old Testament teach that Christ will rise again? Let me mention just two places. For one, Isaiah 53:10–12 says: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great.” This cannot make sense if the Messiah would remain dead. Then, too, Psalm 16:10 prophesied, “thou wilt not...suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

Moreover, many Old Testament stories and types predict or prefigure the resurrection of Christ, such as the bird in Leviticus 14 that was dipped in blood and freed, or two chapters later, the goat that was sent away, or the budding rod of Aaron in Numbers 17, or Jonah's “resurrection” from the fish's belly on the third day (Matt. 12:40).

In addition to the Old Testament Scriptures, Christ plainly told the disciples on several occasions that He would die, and then rise again the third day. In John 2 He declared that He would raise up the temple of His body in three days (vv. 19, 21), and in Matthew 16:21 He tells us that He would be killed and rise again on the third day (e.g. Luke 9:22; 18:33).

The disciples seemed to have had deaf ears regarding Christ's teaching on His resurrection. But now John believes. He believes that Jesus is the real Messiah after

all, the Lord of glory, the exalted Son of God, who has come to suffer and die, and to rise again, to save sinners.

Notice that John's belief had its roots in Scripture. The implication of verse 9 is that if he had understood the Scripture about Jesus' resurrection, he would have believed already. And this is ultimately where our faith must rest.

And yet we see from this narrative that the Lord is patient with our slowness to believe. What prompted John's faith? Was it the Old Testament Scriptures? Was it the words of Jesus? No; it was the physical evidence of the empty grave clothes.

Isn't it remarkable that none of the disciples believed until they had physical evidence of Jesus' resurrection? Jesus later said to Thomas: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). On the other hand, we see the condescension of God in providing abundant evidence for us of the resurrection of Christ. The angel did not have to roll the stone to let Jesus out, but he did so to let the disciples in, so they could see the evidence of His resurrection.

Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus? You say, "I wish we had some strong evidence like John had." My response is: "We do." We have the testimony of John and Peter to what they saw in the tomb. John says in verse 31 that everything in his gospel was written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We have the evidence of the Old Testament scriptures as well as the complete New Testament canon.

In addition to the straightforward record of the Scriptures (which is more than sufficient), there is abundant circumstantial evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as John was helped to believe by the

grave clothes, we can be helped by circumstantial evidence, such as these thoughts:

1. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, then someone would certainly have produced the body, and Christianity would have died. Instead the angel beckons, "Come, see the place where the Lord lay" (Matt. 28:6). See the empty grave clothes where Jesus' body had been laid.
2. Someone could not have stolen the body because the story that the Jewish leaders made up is not credible at all. It is a stretch to believe that the entire band of Roman guards was sleeping while the disciples stole the body. If somehow they were sleeping, they would have awoken at the sound of the removal of the gravestone. And if they had continued to sleep, their testimony means nothing, because they were not witnesses. There is no way that Peter and John could have found the tomb with no guards and with the grave clothes essentially undisturbed, if the guards had not been supernaturally scared away.
3. How could the defeated and discouraged disciples, who did not even believe that Jesus would rise again, go about making up a story, and live joyfully to the end of their lives, dying martyred deaths, if Jesus did not really rise from the dead?

These kinds of considerations can sometimes be helpful for us to believe in Christ's resurrection. Of course it does not prove the resurrection, but it can help strengthen our faith.

The truth stands: Jesus arose from the dead. The resurrection is a foundational truth. It is the only hope for mankind. The story has been told of an atheist who called a prominent minister for a private talk. He asked

the minister if he really believed in the resurrection. The minister said: “Absolutely, yes.” The atheist replied: “Although I don’t believe in it, the resurrection of Christ is the only hope for mankind.”

If Christ did not rise, then He is a liar. If He is a liar, then the Scriptures are not true. If the Scriptures are not true, then there is no God of the Scriptures. Then there was no supernatural creation; then, we are just a cosmic accident. Life then has no meaning, no purpose, no fulfillment. But Christ did rise from the dead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12–20). He is not a liar. His life and death were not for nothing. As He rose, leaving behind the empty grave clothes, all His work of humiliation was over.

Do you believe in Christ’s resurrection? Do you believe John’s testimony in our text that the grave clothes were empty and that Jesus rose bodily from the dead? Do you believe that Christ rose from the dead not just as *a fact*, but do you put your faith in the risen Lord? Does the truth of Christ’s resurrection impact your entire life?

You ask, “How does Christ’s resurrection impact my life? How does the testimony of the empty grave clothes impact me?” We see that in our third point:

Resurrection by Foreshadowing

The empty grave clothes foreshadows several wonderful truths for God’s people. If you’re a believer these foreshadowed truths are significant for you in at least five ways:

1. Jesus’ empty grave clothes assures us of His resurrection, which in turn foreshadows *our blessed resurrection*. “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (1 Thess. 4:14). The Spirit who raised up

Jesus, will also quicken our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). Just as Jesus left behind His grave clothes, so we will too; Christ's resurrection is a sure pledge of ours (cf. Rom. 6:5; 2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:21).

Empty grave clothes show us Christ's victory over sin, for He came into the world in swaddling clothes, and now symbolically leaves behind the clothes of His humiliation, so that we who are believers might leave all our humiliating sin-clothes behind in the grave and be resurrected in the white-robed righteousness of everlasting glory in Christ Jesus. Being raised in the likeness of Christ, clothed in His white robe of righteousness, we may rejoice that, in the day of our resurrection, sin will be left behind forever.

2. Jesus' empty grave clothes foreshadow *our eternal justification*. Those empty clothes declare that divine justice demanded Christ's release, for He had made perfect satisfaction to His Father for all the sins of His people, had fulfilled all prophecies (Heb. 10), and was now raised again "for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). Just as the Father confirmed with an oath, in Jesus' resurrection that salvation is complete once and for all, so our resurrection will be the consummate declaration of our justification, for Christ's sake, before our holy Judge.

3. Jesus' empty grave clothes foreshadow *how* we will be raised from the dead. It will be *an instant and deliberate transformation of our bodies*. Our text implies that Christ did not get up slowly, unwrap all the linens, and walk out of the grave. He was instantly transformed into His glorious resurrected body. Just as He had been deliberate in all His sufferings and death, so He was deliberate in the instantaneousness of His resurrection,

which occurred on the morning of the third day, even as He had said that it would. We too, even if we live until the Judgment Day, our bodies will be instantly changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, deliberately and precisely at the time appointed by God (1 Cor. 15:52).

What a comfort for us this is, dear believers! Just as our souls are instantly purified in the moment of our physical death, so our bodies will be instantly purified in the moment of our physical resurrection. The empty grave clothes signify that you, too, will live forever in as perfect a state as Jesus lives, glorifying Him with perfect souls and perfect bodies to all eternity—and that from the exact, deliberate moment appointed by God!

4. Jesus' empty grave clothes foreshadow with *what type of body we will be raised*. Our resurrection will be similar to Jesus'. He is the firstfruits of the resurrection. Jesus came right out of the grave clothes, leaving them behind. His resurrection was different from that of Lazarus. Lazarus returned to the same life as before. He later died. Jesus, however, in His new glorious body, disappeared and reappeared anywhere He wished. Similarly, our physical bodies will be transformed into new, glorious bodies governed by the Holy Spirit. Christ will "change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21).

What body will we be raised with? Paul anticipated this same question when writing to the Corinthians: "But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?" (1 Cor. 15:35). He answers with a comparison. When a farmer plants grain, he sows a bare seed. Over time, the seed is transformed into a wonderful plant. In the same way, though our natural body "is sown

in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (vv. 42–44).

Child of God, just think, the body that you now can touch and feel, though it will soon decay in the grave (if the Lord tarries), will be transformed like Christ’s was. There is no need to speculate on which atoms and molecules God will use to recreate your new body. It is enough to know that your body will be transformed, recreated, resurrected. It will exist in a whole new way—different than we experience now, and so it will not need the same materials. Not all the particles of the natural body are needed for the resurrection body. The farmer only plants the seed, but out comes the full plant. The plant takes particles from soil, water, and air. Yet the buried seed is the origin and foundation of the new plant. The identity of the seed passes into the plant. Out of its ugliness and decay springs forth the new plant. So our resurrection bodies will rise out of the seed of our decayed bodies. Even elect children, who die before birth, will rise with a glorious resurrection body.

But perhaps you have a question. Since Christ rose with what Paul calls a spiritual body, did He not then rise bodily? Yes, He did. His physical body did not remain in the grave clothes. It was transformed into a glorified, yet physical body. He ate food in this new body. The disciples could touch His body. Still today, Christ has a human body and soul in heaven, though he shines with glorious, divine light.

Similarly, our resurrection bodies are not only real material bodies, but also spiritual, or glorified. This new body will be grand, glorious, incorruptible, and will never become weary. Our bodies will be recreated to be able to

enjoy the glories of being in God's presence. Our new bodies will know no pain, suffering, and illness. There will be unlimited opportunities for service to our King and Savior. This transformation will happen when Christ returns to earth bodily for the second and final time to judge all men.

There is also a dismal flip-side to this truth for the unbeliever. If you do not wholeheartedly believe in Christ's resurrection, you will still be raised from the dead. You too will be raised with a new body. But the purpose of this resurrection will not enable you to sustain and delight in the glory of God. You will be resurrected in a body that will be designed to survive the torments of hell; and that forever. It is said of criminals on the cross that increasingly they have only one desperate desire: to die. Usually they survived for a day or so on the cross, but eventually died. In hell, you too will desire annihilation but it will never come.

Hell is a real place. Jesus preached more about hell than about heaven. Hell is real because God takes sin seriously. Would He have sent His own Son to die the extremely painful and shameful death of the cross, and poured out His wrath upon His Son, if He did not take sin seriously? Anytime you are tempted to doubt the existence of hell, take another look at the cross of Christ.

Have you ever been to the funeral of a family member or a friend? Did it make you think of your own death? Child of God, our text shows that we need not fear the grave. Are you nearing the end of your life? Do you have one foot in the grave already? Does the look of the cold coffin frighten you? Does the prospect of your body disintegrating in the earth make you tremble?

5. Jesus' empty grave clothes foreshadow the truth that *death and the grave have no more dominion over us*. Let us not forget on this resurrection day, that Christ, our Head, has already passed through the grave. He left His grave clothes behind! His body that was buried is no longer on this earth. He is now in heaven. If the head of the church, Christ, has risen, the body of Christ—the living church—is sure to follow. In principle, we are risen with Christ already now (Col. 3:1). If death no longer has dominion over Him, the head, we can be sure that it will not have dominion over us who form His body. We are raised up together with Him, sitting in heavenly places in Christ Jesus—here in principle already, and eventually forever in perfection (Eph. 2:6). Your physical grave is merely a temporary resting-place for your body because Jesus is risen and is alive as the empty grave clothes testify. Let us then sing with the living church:

Christ the Lord is ris'n today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heav'ns, and earth, reply, Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia! Where
thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia!
Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ hath led, Alleluia!

Foll'wing our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

Hail the Lord of earth and heaven, Alleluia!
Praise to Thee by both be given, Alleluia!
Thee we greet triumphant now, Alleluia!
Hail the Resurrection, thou, Alleluia!

King of glory, Soul of bliss, Alleluia!
Everlasting life is this, Alleluia!
Thee to know, Thy pow'r to prove, Alleluia!
Thus to sing, and thus to love, Alleluia!¹

¹ . Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, 1739 (public domain).

