

Linens and Things

John 20:1-10 and Isaiah 25: 6-9

Easter Sunday April 1, 2018

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On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people
he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,
so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

As we head to the story in today's scripture passage from the book of John, I want to give you a bit of context. A week before, Jesus had come into Jerusalem triumphantly—but his triumph seemed to be short-lived, as he was

betrayed, handed over to the authorities, and nailed to a cross. His best friends deserted and denied him. He was laid in a grave. A couple days later, here's what happens:

John 20:1-10 (NRSV)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Today is Easter, but it's April Fool's Day, one of my favorite holidays. A couple of you already mentioned it to me: I said "Happy Easter!" to one of you, and you said, "April Fools! It's Christmas!" Another said, "We got here a little late, so April Fools we had to sit in the front row!"

We're not alone in thinking about April Fools, because companies all over the world have used it to try to drum up interest. Why else would you advertise bacon-flavored Scope mouthwash? Virgin Australia's new Canine Crew of

flight attendants? Train Ticket tatoos for those forgetful travelers at Virgin Trains? And perhaps my personal favorite...

Funeralbooker.com lets you buy the domicinerator—so that your loved one can be cremated right there in the comfort of your own back yard.

In some ways our Easter story this morning risks being the biggest April Fools prank of them all. Mary Magdalene runs back from the open tomb to tell Peter and John that someone has taken Jesus out of the tomb and she doesn't know where they've taken him.

I think it must have sounded so unbelievable to Peter and John that they were worried Mary might wind up this story with a big "April Fools!" So hardly after she finished, they take off toward the tomb themselves. And they find an empty tomb too! Jesus is no longer dead—his body is nowhere to be found!

And then in his account of the story, the author John seems to be playing an April fools joke on us readers. He doesn't answer any of our basic questions: like why Mary Magdalene doesn't remember that Jesus has been telling them he'd rise from the dead. Like how the stone got rolled away. Like maybe just how exactly Jesus came back from the dead.

We might think that's what we'd get in a story about Jesus coming back from the dead, but John is like "April fools!" You're not hearing about any of this! Instead, you get grave clothes.

That's right! Grave clothes!

[v. 5-7] The other disciple... saw the linen wrappings lying there....Then Simon Peter...saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

It's Easter! There must be other things to talk about. But John spends three verses talking about Jesus' grave clothes. This story is only ten verses long. That's thirty percent of his story! On grave clothes!

He must be morbid, right? After all, grave clothes are what you wear when you die. And we Americans don't like to think about dying. Even when things look most difficult, we don't like to think about death. We do everything we can to prolong life. We don't even like to think about aging! One of my friends recently sent me a link to an article about a minister in Atlanta who was caught taking money from his church...so that he could get Botox. When your minister starts embezzling in order to get plastic surgery, it might be time to find a new church.

So when the Gospel of John starts talking about grave clothes, is it time to get a new Gospel? What can John be after, focusing on something so morbid as this, when most of us would rather not even think about aging or death? Why this unnatural fascination with grave clothes?

That's the question I asked once at an adult Bible study. And the first lady to speak helped me see that John had more up his sleeve than just a good April fools day joke. She said, "Maybe John talks about these grave clothes because they're proof. Jesus is really alive! Look—he's no longer wrapped up in those linens. He's no longer lying in the grave. He's alive!"

She helped it click for me. John's not just focusing on grave clothes. He's focusing on *empty* grave clothes. Grave clothes which have lost all of their meaning. Grave clothes which are totally unnecessary. John doesn't have an unnatural interest in grave clothes—he has an unnatural interest in the One who no longer needs them!

The empty grave clothes tell us that the power of Christ is greater than the power of death. The passage tells us

[v. 8] the other disciple...went inside. He saw and believed.

Those empty grave clothes make all the difference to John. We no longer have to avoid death... we no longer have to fear death.

My great aunt Dean knew this was true. She was my grandmother's sister, and she lived in Danville, Kentucky. She was legendary in our family—we still talk about “Aunt Dean meals” where there are so much food on the table you literally can't get a serving of everything on your plate. She was a hilarious woman—when she moved from her huge farmhouse into a small city apartment, she said that her bathroom was so small that you went in backwards or forwards, depending on what you had to do.

Like the Gospel of John, Aunt Dean had an unnatural interest in grave clothes. She had a section in her closet where she would keep the outfit she wanted to be buried in...which wasn't so odd, by itself. Many older adults plan their burial outfit. But many older adults don't keep their burial outfit in constant rotation. She'd swap out the outfits with the seasons; she'd buy something new and stick it there. It was like a game to her! She put the “fun” in funeral!

If the TV show had been around back then, she definitely would have qualified for “America’s Next Top Model: Funeral Edition.”

Aunt Dean was not worried about her death. She knew it was coming some day, and she was ready. She could fiddle with her own grave clothes because she had focused on Jesus’ grave clothes. She knew they were empty. She knew he had conquered death. She had faith in him, and she had no fear. She could walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and fear no evil...because Jesus’ grave clothes are empty.

Her preparation for her death didn’t end with those grave clothes. She hadn’t tried to buy the Funeralbooker.com’s April Fool’s Day joke domicinerator, but she had written down what scriptures and hymns she wanted for her funeral. It made all the planning so much easier for my grandmother—her minister told Grammy that all of Aunt Dean’s preparation was “the best gift that she could have given her.”

The reason Aunt Dean was able to give Grammy that gift was because Jesus had given her an even greater gift: those empty grave clothes, centuries and centuries before.

Jesus has given that same gift to each one of us.

It’s those empty grave clothes which tell us Paul’s classic words are true:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that victory comes to us every day. It's no April Fool's.

Thanks Be To God, Amen.