

The Disciples Discovery of the Empty Grave Clothes

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[0 : 00] 9 verses.

John chapter 20 verses 1 to 9. And I want us to think about the disciples' discovery of the empty grave clothes.

We know from the fourfold witness of the Gospels that on the first day of the week after the Jewish Sabbath, at least four of the women went to the tomb early.

When it is said it was dark, it means the daylight was just coming in. And we know that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joseph, Salome and John at least were there and probably others too.

And they went to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid and they went as devoted followers of Jesus in order to anoint his body further.

[1 : 20] That was their plan. They couldn't do what they wanted to do, the Gospel tells us, because it was too late. The Sabbath was coming on. You remember that the Sabbath in the Jewish world then and now begins late afternoon in Israel where the sun goes down by around five o'clock.

So they were unable to anoint the body the way they wanted to do it. And so they were there early on that morning of the first day of the week in order to do this, to do something for Jesus now that he was gone.

But of course, as we see in the accounts, they had a problem. They wondered how the stone was going to be taken away. In the passage that we're looking at here, we're simply told they went early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

In the other Gospel accounts, we gather they had a problem. Who's going to roll this stone away? And you see, it's interesting that John doesn't give us that detail.

He simply looks in and he shows us that, as is true in life, the life of the Lord's people, the big problems that we feel we can't manage, God takes care of them.

[2 : 50] And when they got there, the big problem was gone. The big stone had been rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. God had provided for them. But what a sight met their eyes, we read here.

Not only was the stone rolled away from the cave, but the body of Jesus was gone from where it had been laid. And we discover in this passage that Mary didn't wait to consider properly.

She didn't wait. That's Mary Magdalene, of course. She didn't wait to consider, or even hear what the angelic announcement had to say. She went straight to Peter and the other disciples.

Verse 2. She ran and came to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved. That's John himself. And said to them, they have taken away, they have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.

So she was first off the block, so to speak, to go to Peter and John and the others and to tell them the sad tale. And in a sense, you see, the disciples were witnesses to their own unbelief.

[4 : 09] They were regarding the situation as one in which the body had been stolen. The emphasis is on the body, the dead body.

John, when he came there, we discover, was beginning to waver a little in that view. But basically, he was going with the flow, with the view that the body had been taken, stolen, and they had to work out where it was and recover it.

But as we consider these empty grave clothes, we want to, as it were, to get into where these disciples were on that first Lord's Day morning, the first day of the week.

And to ponder what met their wondering eyes. To understand it in order that our own faith may be strengthened. I just want to think about three principal things.

First of all, what they heard. And secondly, what they did. And thirdly, what they saw. And what they heard was Mary Magdalene's report in the first place.

[5 : 23] The body's gone. They have taken it. Verse 2b. The body's gone. They've taken it. It's stolen. They've hidden it. We've got to find it.

And so Peter and John, they made haste to Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. The rich man's tomb in which the body of Jesus had been laid.

And I want to emphasize here, still, there is no thought of resurrection in their minds. Those who oppose, for example, the Islamic world, but others too, the secular world, oppose the physical bodily resurrection of our Lord, fail to take account of the weight of evidence.

There is solid evidence. And one of the most compelling things is the view of the disciples themselves. To adapt the words of a song.

Resurrection was the last thing on their minds. They weren't thinking resurrection. They were thinking dead body, albeit the dead body of the Lord, but it was a body that was now missing.

[6 : 44] We've got to find it. Verse 9, you see, says, for as yet they did not know, they didn't understand that he must rise again from the dead.

Verse 9 is key here. Because the word to know is here. The one that's used behind this is to understand. They didn't register. You and I know that sometimes, especially if we've been brought up on the Bible and we've learned verses and indeed chapters.

And we've absorbed them into our memory. And perhaps years later, maybe we hear a sermon or maybe we're reading a little study guide or something. All of a sudden, something that we memorized, we realize we never understood.

We never stopped to understand or to try to understand. Well, you could argue they should have understood, but they didn't understand. For as yet they did not understand, verse 9, the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.

So that helps to give us an understanding. Although he must rise, they didn't understand that. They didn't register it. They weren't affected in going to the tomb.

[8 : 07] They simply heard the report and went to see what they could do to recover the body. It was stolen, but who stole it?

Where is it now? And so on. And I think, you see, and this is important too. It was interesting that at our communion service last Lord's Day, Callum MacDonald, the minister, referred to the swoon theory that Jesus didn't literally die on the cross, but he only appeared to die.

That's the Islamic world's argument that it was an appearance of death. But the truth of the matter is, you've got a fourfold record.

You've got a consistent record. Apart from this being the word of God, by the spirit of God, you've got people who were compelled by the evidence to see that Jesus died.

Indeed, we know from Joseph of Arimathea's request to Pilate that he couldn't get the body until the chief policeman, the centurion, cleared it that he was dead.

[9 : 27] He was getting paid for that. He was getting a bonus for it. And he couldn't let the body go until he was certain that Jesus was dead. And he was summoned to Pilate to clear it.

Yes, the body's dead. They can have it. Dead. The disciples came looking for the precious dead body of Jesus.

No reviving. The evidence is compelling. The disciples themselves, in the face of what was in the tomb, were still firmly of the view the body has been taken.

And one of the practical things we can take out of this, I think, is we mustn't be moved easily by arguments that call into question the biblical truth, especially about the resurrection, about the death of the saviour, of course.

We must get a good grip of the evidence. We must be firm in our knowledge and understanding. To quote Peter, we haven't followed canningly devised fables yet.

[10 : 45] Peter said we were eyewitnesses. And our eyewitness was actually wrong, and we had to be taught by the Lord what was right.

And what they heard made them go to the tomb to look and see if they could make any connection between the evidence there and the location now, that is then now, of the body, where it is.

That's the way they were thinking. And it's important, therefore, for us to remember that when people come to us and they rubbish the truth here, that we have to help them to get beyond that.

We have to help them to see that the spirit of unbelief, of doubt, was there in those choice disciples. And they had to be taught by the Lord.

We have to help people who resist the truth to see what it is to receive the love of the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 10 tells us that those who go into outer darkness, those who are lost forever, are so because they never receive the love of the truth.

[12 : 05] that they might be saved. Notice that, received the love of the truth. And we have to help people to get there.

Patiently, perseveringly, sometimes we have to listen to a lot of rubbish and not let on we think it's rubbish. I don't mean we have to deceive.

I mean we hang loose on it. We hang lightly on it. And I can tell you that firsthand, having spent 10 precious years of my life among the Jewish people and among Muslims and among atheists and secularists and New Agers, you name them.

The truth is to be received in love. But you see, even at this point in the account, the narrative, the disciples themselves were not receiving the truth.

As yet they didn't understand, verse 9, that he must rise. I didn't watch it, but they were having another go at the Da Vinci Code last night.

[13 : 19] And we just remind you that the core of it is the guy himself never intended it to be taken as absolutely true.

He made a good story. He made a lot of money. The evidence of the gospel simply overwhelm any nonsense like that.

However plausible, it flies in the face of the fourfold gospel. And so we must make sure in our own hearts that we have received the love of the truth, that it matters to us.

I don't know about you, but apart from our younger friends here today, I think the rest of us, I can safely say, grew up. And whenever a person wanted to emphasize that what they were telling was true, they would say, it's gospel, honestly, didn't they?

They used to say, it's a gospel truth. And they thought that was an end of all controversy. Believe me, what I'm telling you is gospel.

[14 : 27] How often did we hear that and use that on our way up to where we are now? Because there was a day when the gospel was regarded, even though people didn't receive it, as true.

We must make sure that we ourselves receive the love of that truth in order to help others to get there. And it's important, you see, that when the disciples went along, they had been deflected from the truth.

They were in a state of amazement, of doubt, of uncertainty. So that, as we've said already, what they heard from Mary Magdalene didn't make them think they were going to find the living Savior at all.

That's the first thing. What they heard. And what they did. Well, we've anticipated this a little bit. I want to focus in more carefully on it.

And what they did was they ran together outside the city wall to get to Skull Hill, to get to Golgotha. Because the rich man's tomb was just by Skull Hill where the crucifixion took place.

[15 : 54] It was only just a few hundred yards outside the wall of the city, the north wall of the city. But it's not difficult to use a little imagination, yes, unsanctified too, to think about them running to get there.

Even if they didn't all together buy into what Mary Magdalene had said, they were enough moved by what he said, to go and see. And I'll guarantee you that was, it may not have been a long run in terms of length, but in terms of the effect of Mary's words on them, it would have been a mighty difficult run.

Their strength would have been sapped as they pondered what they were going to find and what they were going to do next. And we find that in our own experience that this is often the way those of you who have had a terrible shock and you try to get into action as a result of it, you find your strength is sapped.

You can hardly get going. And they had a shock, believe it, they have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.

Big shock. But they got there. We're told that Peter led the way but John outran him. And isn't it touching here, we tend to focus on John outrunning Peter, John the younger outrunning the older man, but it's interesting and it's very revealing that Peter is the one who was first off the blocks and Peter ran.

[17 : 49] Peter who had so recently disassociated himself from the Lord, denied knowledge of him with oath and curse and it's Peter who makes haste first of all to find the body.

And there's something in this, a practical lesson as we move along. There's something in this, there's a spiritual principle here.

Peter, was Peter the fallen? Peter the one who had sinned grievously? Peter the one who had distanced himself from the Lord?

And it's now Peter who wants to find the body. And the spiritual principle is simply this, that in our experience, when Christ seems to have withdrawn from us or is absent from our experience, we're not to leave it that way.

We're to seek him. We're to seek him with all our heart. Jesus himself said, you shall seek me and find me when you shall seek me with all your heart.

[19 : 04] And the spiritual principle is, if we've neglected attended to him, seeking him, seeking his fellowship and blessing, and he feels far off from us, we're not to leave it there.

We're to, as it were, go after him. We're to seek him in prayer. We're to seek him in the way of blessing through the world. There's an interesting reference, isn't there, in Song of Solomon, verse 2 of chapter 3, that illustrates, of course, the relationship between the Messiah, between Christ and his bride.

And there, in that verse, it says, I will seek the one I love. I sought him, but could not find him.

But you see, when we seek him and we can't find him, we're not about a full stop there and go away and do something else. No, we're to keep on seeking him. Jesus says, keep on seeking and you shall find.

Keep on knocking and it shall be open to you. Keep on asking and you shall have. There are times in our experience when he seems to be far off from us and the blessedness we knew at first when we came to know the Lord seems to have gone.

[20 : 28] where to seek him and where to find him and to be renewed. And even at a practical level, in terms of what they did literally, they ran to find Jesus.

In a spiritual way we can seek him and seek to be renewed into his fellowship. Seek to know him whom to know his life eternal.

Well the last thing we want to consider and perhaps this is the key part of it, what they saw. What they heard from Mary shocked them.

And what they did was they responded positively, they went to see for themselves. And thirdly then, what they saw. We're told that John was there first and he looked into the tomb.

Verse 5. And he, that is John, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying, yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb.

[21 : 48] So, what they saw was not what they expected to see. They expected to see the disruption of the situation in the tomb, of chaos, evidence that robbers had come and had stolen away the body.

You must bear in mind with me that Nicodemus and Joseph had embalmed the body using about a hundred pounds weight of powdered mer and aloes.

And there's no way you could lift the body of a rock shelf and take it away without the mer and aloes spilling out and the evidence being there that something happened.

Or even if that wasn't the case, as we know it wasn't, because the grave clothes were there, there would have been evidence, there would have been disruption to the grave clothes, the mer and aloes mixture would be everywhere.

The evidence of foul deeds would be obvious. But John didn't see anything like that.

[23 : 14] There was no evidence of robbers at work. There was no evidence even of the grave clothes being removed by men or angels.

else. What we're told first is John fastened his eyes. He didn't go into the tomb, the rock cave. But he fixed his eyes on the grave clothes.

Verse 5, and he stooping down, looking in, saw the linen cloths lying. Now, the interesting thing here is, and you probably see it in your English version, the word there is in italics because it's not there.

It's to give the sense. But the word that's used is simply lying. And then, the handkerchief, that is the head turban, that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together, the English version, he's a bit unclear, together in a place by itself.

That really means in its own place. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a photo of the inside of the rock tomb at what's called Gordon's Calvary.

[24 : 39] But it's a cave, and in the cave, there's a typical shelf cut out of the rock that would hold the body. And then at the end where the head would be, there's a little step up and another shelf where the head would lie.

If you look at my hand and arm like that, you get the idea. And what John is saying here is that the head bandage was in its own place, lying.

And then we're told Simon, Peter arrived, puffing and panting no doubt, he arrived, verse 6, he came following him and went into the tomb, Peter bowed to sever, went into the tomb, and we're told that when he went in, he saw the linen cloths lying, same word as used, same verb as used, and the handkerchief that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in its own place.

The Spirit of God brings both the observation of John and Peter together. Both saw the grave clothes lying, and they saw the head bandage in its own place.

And it's important for us, I think, to listen carefully to what's being said, rather than construct our own view of the thing. Many expositor has done this in the past.

[26 : 31] They've simply assumed that the angels removed the clothing, or that Jesus himself, when he rose, removed the clothing. But that's not what is being said.

Both John and Peter say the grave clothes were lying. And the word that's used here in the original is always used for something that's carefully set, arranged.

Actually, there's an interesting one, just as a taster for this. Time's moving on. But at the other end, so to speak, of Jesus' life, when he came into this world as a babe in the manger, in Luke's gospel in chapter 2 and verse 16, when they came, they saw the babe lying in a manger.

it's the same verb it's used. Now, I submit to the ladies, and to the men too, of course, that when mum puts the baby down in the cot or in the bed, things are very carefully arranged.

And there's a focus on that, that the verb conveys that sense of carefully said there. And what's being said here is both of them looked in this way, and they saw where the Lord lay.

[28 : 06] And the clothes that had embalmed him were simply lying there. But the body was gone. And the head bandage was lying in its own place.

Jesus was gone. We are not told that it had been removed by man or angel or the Lord himself. What we are told is that Jesus rose up and he left the grave clothes there.

I frankly find it difficult to understand why anybody, expositor or otherwise, would have a problem with Jesus simply coming up through the grave clothes because we read at the end of this chapter, he came into the room, the doors been shut, everything was barred, he came into the room.

He did that twice in the space of eight days. His resurrection body had a property that it didn't have before. He was able to do it and wonderful though it was that he could rise about of the grave clothes and leave them there, it's no more wonderful than the fact that he could appear in the room, the doors and windows being barred and bolted for fear of the Jews.

And bear in mind too that he didn't come out through a sepulcher door, the big rock, circular rock, hadn't been moved by the angels.

[29 : 44] It wasn't moved to let Jesus out, it was moved to let the disciples in. And he simply left the tomb and all that was associated with his death as finished with.

And what better way to do it than to leave the grave clothes lying there where they had held him for a time. We haven't time to dwell on the powers of his resurrection body but simply to notice that he could do these things in a wonderful way that before that he couldn't do.

And therefore we are to accept without any nervousness that he rose in the body and that he rose out of the grave clothes.

He left them as a mark of the end of death holding him. He was not a phantom or a spirit creature as the JW say.

He emphatically demonstrated to his disciples that he was in the body. I agree not flesh and blood as he had had before but flesh and bones certainly.

[31 : 05] Luke tells us in chapter 24 verse 39 and again in verse 42 that he ate fish and henny comb. He ate with his disciples in the body.

In the body that he rose in leaving the grave clothes behind. And of course when the disciples saw him when he appeared that evening they were shocked.

They were scared. They were amazed. They thought they had seen a ghost. But Jesus said don't be of peace to you. See my hands and my feet it is I and not a spirit.

He brought peace to their troubled minds. And he demonstrated his lordship over life and death. And it's important for us to lay hold of that.

Death could not hold him. Death he was under its sway only until the set time. and he left the vestments of death as it were where they were ordered as they were when he was lying in.

[32 : 24] And he says as he said to his disciples he says to us now as he said to them be of good cheer I have overcome I am the conqueror.

Wonderful it is fulfilling the words of the prophet Hosea chapter 13 and verse 14 wonderful it is that Jesus fulfills these words by his own life and death and resurrection life.

He says to us I will ransom you from the grave I will redeem you from death and he turns to death and he says I will be your plagues oh grave and I will be your destruction oh death that at least helps us to understand the significance the real significance of the empty grave clothes we're not to be faithless but believing believing in him who has the power over death and hell and life itself and who says to us he who believes in me even though he die yet shall he live do you believe this my dear friend you have to answer that and you have to if your answer is positive you have to affirm it in a day when there is so much unbelief and apostasy

Amen