The Napkin is Still Folded

Acts 5:12-20; Revelation 1:4-18; John 20:1-7; Psalm148 4.28.19

Summary: The significance of the folded napkin in the Jewish culture makes some powerful points in considering the resurrection.

[Concept for this sermon originally preached by Dr. Clyde Box. I receive many questions as to the historicity of the "Napkin Legend"...Dr. Box reportedly says it comes from an "old book" on his shelf.]

In Bible days, when someone died, it was the duty of a family member to close the eyes and kiss the cheek of the dead. When Christ died, this became the duty of two men: Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus. They went to Pontius Pilate and begged the body of the Lord Jesus.

Then they had to take Him down from the cross…which was not an easy chore. First, they had to rig a ladder, and climb up the side of the cross, and then they had to pull His hands off over the nails. There was no way they could get those spikes out of the wood, not from that angle, not with His hands in between the wood and the nail head. Once the hands were loosed, they allowed the body of Jesus to sag into a sheet, and would then remove His feet from the nail in the same manner.

They took the body of Jesus to a new tomb that Joseph had prepared for himself. They washed His body, and wrapped it in white linen, folding His arms over His chest. They closed His eyes, kissed His cheek, and placed a napkin over His face.

They walked away from that tomb, and no doubt they walked in silence…so that all you could hear was the sounds of their sadness, muffled crying, and sniffing. Surely it must have felt like a huge ball of lead in the pit of their stomachs, as they were thinking, “it’s all over, the end of the dream…and it only lasted for 3 short years.”

Three days passed like an eternit. For 3 days, all the demons of hell rejoiced, and Satan and the forces of darkness thought they had won a great victory. For 3 days, the Jewish leaders, as well as the Roman government, congratulated themselves on their brilliant scheme. But on the 3rd day, something wonderful and miraculous happened, as God the Father said to an angel in heaven, “Go get him!” And when the angel’s feet hit the ground, the stone rolled away, and up from the grave He arose…He lives!

In our text, Mary comes first to the empty tomb. She sees the stone rolled away and it frightens her. And so she runs to get Peter and John, and they run together to the tomb as fast as they could. John outran Peter, and when he got there, he looked inside, and saw those grave clothes lying there in disarray. Then Peter arrived and, just as we’d expect of him, went right in. He also saw the linen clothes lying there, but there was something unusual in that scene. Something caught their eye that was very interesting.

The Gospel of John tells us that the napkin, which was placed over the face of Jesus, was not just thrown aside like the grave clothes. The Bible takes an entire verse to tell us that the napkin was neatly folded, and was placed at the head of that stony coffin. Is that important? You’d better believe it!

In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, you have to understand a little bit about Hebrew tradition of that day. The folded napkin had to do with the Master and Servant, and every Jewish boy knew this tradition. When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished.

Now if the master were done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, “I’m done”. But if the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it aside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because the servant knew that the folded napkin meant, “I’m not finished yet.” The folded napkin meant, “I’m coming back!”

Peter and John had walked with Christ for 3 years. They had watched as He opened blind eyes and deaf ears. They watched as He literally raised people from the dead. Then they watched Him die…and as they watched, all of their hopes, all of their dreams were shattered! All they could think was, “it’s over, it’s all over!” And for 3 long days they were in the depths of despair…the lights of their soul had gone dim.

Then after 3 days, they saw an empty tomb. Not only did they see an empty tomb, but they saw a folded napkin in that empty tomb! I believe that when they saw that folded napkin God spoke to them in their being and said, “He’s not finished yet…He’s coming back!”

I thank God today that He’s not finished yet! The tomb is empty, our Savior is alive, the napkin is still folded! I submit to you today that

**1. He’s not finished saving souls!**

The folded napkin says that He’s not finished saving souls. The Bible says that Jesus came into this world for one reason: to save sinners.

John 3: 17 *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

Acts 4:12 *Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*

For that reason, there are 2 kinds of people in the world today. And the distinction is not black and white…for God doesn’t see us that way.

Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, republican or democrat.

In the eyes of God, there are 2 kinds of people here today:

Those that have already been saved and those who need to be saved

Many people have the mistaken idea that GOOD people ARE saved and only BAD people NEED to be saved. Certainly bad people NEED to be saved…and so do “good” people.

May I say as clearly as possible, that no one exists who’s so bad they CAN’T be saved…and no one so good they don’t NEED to be saved!

Rom. 3:23 *For ALL have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*

In God’s eyes, there’s no difference…there are no big sinners and little sinners, just sinners. In God’s eyes, I’m as guilty of breaking God’s holy standard as is Osama bin Ladin. In God’s eyes, there are sinners who have been forgiven…like me, and sinners who have not been…but certainly CAN be.

Years ago, the great evangelist Billy Sunday was preparing to go into a certain city to do a major crusade. He wrote ahead of time to the mayor of the city, and said, “would you please send me the names of people in your area who need serious spiritual help”. To Sunday’s surprise, the mayor sent him…the telephone book! That mayor knew something. He understood that we all need spiritual help.

The napkin is still folded…He’s still saving souls!

**2. The napkin is still folded…He’s not finished reclaiming backsliders!**

A few days before Christ died, He took His disciples aside and told them what was about to happen. He said, I’m going to be betrayed, arrested, beaten, and crucified. Then he looked at the disciples and said, all of you are going to desert me when the heat is on.

The Apostle Peter rose up in typical style and said, Not me, Lord. “though all shall be offended, yet will I never be offended.” In other words, Lord, I don’t know about the rest of these bums, but you can count on me! Then he said, *“Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.”*

Can’t you just see Jesus shaking his head, saying, Peter, you’re gonna deny me three times by tomorrow morning!

Then the Roman soldiers came to arrest the Lord Jesus…with swords and shields and spears. And courage welled up in Peter’s heart, and he took out his sword, and even took a swing at them. He lopped off the ear of one of them…and I doubt he was aiming for his ear!

The Lord did something incredible. He said, friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ear.…wait, that’s a different book!

Seriously, he picked up that ear, and supernaturally reattached it to the man’s head. I don’t know about you, but if I were a Roman soldier that day, and I saw that miracle, I would have changed sides! “Hey fellas, I came with you, but I’m leavin’ with Him!”

They arrested Jesus and subjected Him to shear torture. And while this was happening, Peter’s courage turned to butter. A young lady approached and said, “*I know you, you were with Him*”. And this same man who had just stood up to the entire Roman army, now backed down and said, “*I don’t know the man!”* Another came up and said the same, and again he denied Christ. Yet another said, your accent betrays you, you’re a Galilean, you’re one of His disciples, and he denied Christ the third time. And the rooster immediately crowed, and Peter remembered the words of Jesus. And he looked off into the distance, and there stood Christ, and their eyes met. And when he saw the sadness and sorrow in the eyes of Jesus, it broke His heart.

He went out and wept bitterly, and said, “Oh God, how could I have done this…how can you ever forgive me?” And for 3 days he lived in shame, guilt, and misery, realizing he had denied the Lord.

Listen now, let me drop a blessing in your heart. Look at Mark’s account of the Easter story: Mark 16: 1*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. 2Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”*

*4But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

*6“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and PETER, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*

Can’t you see it in your mind’s eye…these ladies run to the disciples to tell them the good news. He’s alive! He’s alive! He’s risen from the dead!!

Can’t you see Peter, in the corner of the room, shocked, saying, what? What did you say? It’s true?

“Yes, He said to meet Him Galilee!”

And Peter, who has been in the depths of depression for 3 days, stunned at the reality of the Resurrection, and almost encouraged, is once again plagued in his mind at his pitiful denial of Christ, and is dragged right back down into his pit of despair, and thought, “surely He doesn’t mean for me to come…I denied Him 3 times, I cussed and swore…surely, surely He doesn’t mean me!”

And the ladies said, oh, Peter, by the way…He mentioned you by name!!!

Yes, he mentioned you by name!

“He did? What’d He say?”

He said, go tell the disciples…and Peter.

Why did Jesus want to see Peter…to rebuke him? No, he wanted to restore him! And one of the sweetest scenes you’ll ever see in scripture is Peter and Jesus, coming together, and Jesus hugging him and saying, Peter, do you love me? Not, “Peter, are you gonna cuss any more?” No! He said, do you love me?

That’s the real issue. If you’re here today and you know you’re a backslider, let me ask you, was there a time when you WERE right with Him? You see, the real question is not, are you gonna drink anymore? Or cuss anymore?…the real question today is “do you love Him?”……..He loves you!

The napkin is still folded: He’s still saving souls

He’s still reclaiming backsliders

I heard about a little boy who had done something very naughty. His mother punished him. He was afraid his mother was still angry at him…in the kitchen there was a chalkboard on the wall where they wrote down phone messages. When no one was around, he wrote on that chalkboard, dear mom, if you forgive me, please wipe this out.

He went to his room, and about an hour later returned, and to his surprise and joy that chalkboard had been completely erased!

Are you away from God right now? Bring your sins to the cross…

…Jesus will not rub them in, He’ll rub them out!

If you’re here today and you need to be saved, or you need to come BACK to God, I need to remind you there’s coming a day when another supper will take place…it’s called the marriage supper of the Lamb, and I have a feeling that at the marriage supper of the Lamb, that at the end of the meal, Jesus will stand at the head of the table, and He’s gonna wipe His fingers, mouth, clean His beard, and He’s gonna take His napkin, and cast it aside…when that happens, it IS over! The last soul that’s gonna be saved, has been saved. The last backslider that’s gonna come home has!

I beg of you, don’t wait ‘til it’s too late. Right now, the napkin is still folded!

Remember the prodigal son…when he came home, his father welcomed him home with open arms!

Today, Jesus is calling you home, the napkin is still folded!

Good person or bad…you need to be saved.

You need to come home to Christ do it now.

Or, maybe you want to pray for a wayward one in your life.

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, we thank You that the napkin is still folded and it’s not too late to come to You this morning. Forgive me Lord for all my bad stuff, put Your Holy Spirit inside of me, keep me safe in Your kingdom family and make me a blessing to others. In the name of Jesus. Amen.