

**Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA**

**Easter Sunday: March 31, 2024**

**The Linens**

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and Happy Easter! Christ has Risen! Christ has risen indeed! So again, welcome to Christ the Lord Church. I say that because you came here for a reason. Do you even know what that reason may be? I ask that because I make the assumption that everyone in this room of fairly well-educated people, at this point, has taken the belief that the tomb was empty and Christ has risen.

The reason I mention this is because if you have not come to the conclusion that the tomb was empty and Christ has risen, I doubt what I share with you today will help you. But I will try. Many of us have said yes to this story; at least I know that I have. In fact, out of all the stories presented in the Bible and the many things shared about Jesus' life, I believe the crucifixion and the resurrection stories to probably be the most profound, life changing, and well-remembered.

Although the Holy Week and Easter events are recorded at the end of the Gospels, I believe it may be note-worthy to say, that if it were me as an author writing, I would start where my grief and shock are. This is because I remember the details so clearly, and then I would work my way back to Jesus' birth. The story of the resurrection and what people experienced must have had such an intense shock value that it caused the formation of the church, for good or bad. And we, those who believe in the empty tomb, are still here. Yes, we all love Christmas, who wouldn't? But today is the real reason we are Christians.

Most of us know the story, or at least some of the Easter story. We know that Jesus was judged for living a life of proclaiming the love of God to people. We know he was crucified, died, and was buried, and we believe in his resurrection. But for some

of us this faith may be a bit “empty.” So, I thought I would explore some of the details of the “empty” tomb today. You may not know why you are here today, or maybe you do, but I would like to share with you some details that may help you understand why you may be here, and why we believe that Jesus has risen and through it has given us eternal life.

One of those details is what was seen by the disciples as they looked into the tomb. There is a repeated mention of the grave-clothes that makes one wonder about their significance. There is most probably a contrast with the earlier resurrection of Lazarus. The term in Greek σουδάριον (soudarion) is used to describe the head cloth. This term had been employed previously in the case of Lazarus, who had died and been put in a tomb but at Jesus’ command had come out of the tomb still bound, with his hands and feet in bandages and his head still wrapped in a cloth.

Now in Jesus’ case the linen wrappings from around the body are lying in one place and the cloth from around the head is rolled up and in a place by itself. In the case of Lazarus, he had needed to be freed in order to take up life again in this world. But Jesus’ own sovereignty over death is shown in the way he has left behind the wrappings associated with death.

This is something to be noticed by the words “the linen bands lying.” Nothing whatever had been done with them, they were merely lying there. We are not to imagine that they had been unwound from the body as was done with the grave bands of Lazarus when he came to life. Neither had they been cut or stripped off in some other way. They lay just as they had been wound about the limbs and the body, only the body was no longer in them, and thus the wrappings lay flat.

For those of us who have taken the Holy Week journey, you will remember that scripture says after Jesus was taken down from the cross by two friends:

*Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about one hundred pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.*

The tomb had not been robbed and the body stolen, otherwise why would the linens have been carefully removed? This strengthens the claim that others have not taken Jesus away because undoing the weight of the herbs and unrolling the linens would have been quite the project. All the aromatic spices were exactly as they had been strewn between the layers of linen. And these layers, one wound over the other, were numerous, so that all those spices could be held between them.

There is some more evidence to ponder when looking into this empty tomb at the linens. Mary sees two angels, and is the first witness to see Jesus who explains to her that there is some type of metaphysical process going on with him. Thus she cannot touch him. There is the possibility that Jesus had some angelic help rising, but nothing earthly could have left the tomb as neat and the linens as undisturbed.

The description of the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head does not suggest that it still retained the shape of his head, but that it had been neatly rolled up and set to one side by the one who no longer had any use for it. The description is powerful and vivid, not the sort of thing that would have been dreamed up; and there is the fact that two witnesses were present.

Lastly, since everything I presented today is scholarly and well-researched, I will also share with you another theory that is not so well-researched but causes one to wonder, and is my favorite.

The theory is this. When eating a meal at the table in a time when there were servants or servers, when one was done with their meal, they would toss their

napkin over the plate to indicate they were finished and the table area could now be cleared.

However, if one was to step out for a moment for whatever reason but was not done with the meal, they would simply fold the napkin, roll the napkin, showing they were unfinished and desired the meal to be left as it is.

You do know where this story is going don't you? This theory points to the facial cloth of Jesus being neatly presented as a way of telling everyone, the meal is not finished. I am COMING BACK.

Happy Easter. Amen