



Easter, March 31, 2013
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Who's Your Mummy?

John 20: 1-10

I want to add my welcome to all of you who have come to celebrate this day that changed the world forever. Some of you are here every Sunday. Some are an occasional visitor. Whatever the case, we are so glad you are here! Welcome!

Easter is the celebration of the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. But before God could empty it, it had to be filled. So let's start by reading the story of the burial of Jesus. Ordinarily, the body of a crucified criminal was simply thrown onto a smoldering garbage heap. But two men, at great risk, decided they could not let that happen. [Read John 19:38-42]

I'm part of a small group of men that meets every Friday morning to study the Bible, pray and support one another. This Good Friday our LifeGroup read the entire story of the execution of Jesus. Even for the churchiest of us, it was still disturbing. But I wonder: do you find anything disturbing about the burial of Jesus? How about this: where are the disciples? Where are those men with whom Jesus spent the last three years of his life? Men like Peter who promised, "No matter what anyone else does, I will never forsake you?" Or like Thomas who said, "Let us go to Jerusalem and die with him?"

Where are those guys? His dearest friends—who had bragged about their relationship with Jesus when he was alive and popular—now disappear. They leave their Lord hanging on a cross; dead, naked, scandalized... abandoned.

Why would the Bible include such an unflattering picture of its heroes? Because it's true. It is hugely disappointing—but brutally honest of the Bible—to reveal Jesus' disciples as cowards... men who claimed ostentatiously to be his followers, and then, when the chips were down, were nowhere to be found. The very first members of the very first Christian church failed Jesus.

On any given Easter morning, the church is filled with people who want to celebrate Jesus in some way. Maybe you believe in the resurrection; maybe you aren't sure, but you are drawn to Jesus. And yet you have been so disappointed by His Church. You have watched as those who claim to be followers of Jesus betray Him... dishonor Him. You find it so hard to get past the failings of Christians that it keeps you from ever discovering how unfailing Jesus is. As we will see,

Christ gives his disappointing friends another chance. For those of you who have been burned by the Church—maybe even by this church—I hope this morning you can get past your disappointment with those of us who have failed you so that you can finally meet the one who never will.

Well, while his disciples were quivering in hiding, two men—who had a lot more to lose—came through for Jesus. Who? Joe and Nick. Joseph of Arimathea was a powerful, rich man. He was a member of the Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin, and he owned an expensive, unused tomb. He had noticed Jesus and become a quiet admirer. Quiet, because he was afraid of peer pressure. What would his colleagues think if they knew that a member of the religious establishment was a secret disciple of Jesus?

The other guy was Nick. Only John tells us about Nicodemus. He's the man who came to Jesus in the middle of the night and heard these famous words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Nicodemus never forgot that moment. He, also, was a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin. And he, too, was afraid of what his friends would think. Yet, like Joe, Nick stepped forward when none of Jesus' closest friends were willing to do so.

If you are one of those persons who has admired Jesus from afar—a person of education or wealth or influence—but are a little afraid that if you actually came out of the closet as a Christ-follower, it might cost you... maybe you will find courage from the example of Joe and Nick. When they decided to come clean, they did it in a big way. They gave Jesus a burial worthy of a king. Joseph donated his own tomb. Nicodemus donated an extravagant amount of spices and ointments with which to prepare the body. How much? This much... [two 5 gallon buckets] about 100 pounds. It was enormously expensive!

These two newly-declared disciples took down the body of Jesus, bathed it in oil and spices, and then wrapped it in what John describes as linen strips... perhaps something like this. [Someone comes up and wrap Pastor Mark's hands, arms] A layer of linen, a layer of spices... and after he was wrapped and anointed, they did one more thing. They placed a napkin-like cloth upon his head; maybe to cover the face. Sometimes it was tied around the dead man's chin so that it would not sag. We won't do that; I'm not done preaching. (Some of you are saying, "Tie the rag; tie the rag!")

By the time they were done, Jesus looked like a mummy. Then having honored him like a king, they laid him on a shelf cut out of a brand new tomb and rolled a stone across the door so that nothing could get inside... or outside, for that matter. That's how the tomb got occupied. Let's read what happened next. [John 20:1-10]

It is faithful Mary Magdalene who discovered the tomb had been tampered with and ran to tell the disciples. And notice God's kindness. The very disciples who failed Jesus—who left his body on a cross to be scavenged by crows—God in His grace sends His first evangelist right back to them. Even in their hiding, their failure, their abandonment of Jesus, God has not abandoned them. He gives them another chance. For the person sitting here this morning who feels like they have been a serial disappointment to God—one failure after another—you should be encouraged to discover how persistently God continues to invite each of us back into a loving, forgiving relationship with Him.

Mary runs to find Peter and the others. And Peter and the disciple we believe to be John, have an early morning footrace through the streets of Jerusalem. Did you notice how much smack-talking John does about how he beat Peter to the grave? Well, he might have won the race, but he didn't have the guts to go inside. He just stopped and peeked. It was too creepy! Out of shape Peter—who apparently never met an Egg McBagel he didn't like—stumbled up from behind, huffing and puffing. When John hesitated, Peter saw his opportunity and rushed past him into the tomb. And what did these two out-of-breath friends discover? Maybe not what they expected.

In 1995, I visited the famed Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The place contains 160,000 artifacts. But the most fascinating part of the museum for me was their mummy collection: 27 of them, including artifacts from the tomb of the famous Boy King, King Tut. It is amazing—and a little creepy—to walk into a darkened room, have your eyes adjust to the light, and find yourself face to face with a linen-wrapped body thousands of years old. I will never forget it. Nearly twenty years later, it still sticks in my mind.

John never forgot what he saw when he peeked into the tomb. Maybe he expected to see a body; a mummy-like corpse, as was the Jewish custom. But it didn't happen that way, did it? What did he see?

I have read this story hundreds of times. But I noticed something this year that jumped out at me... the cloth. Did you notice how many times John mentions the burial cloths? Verse 19:40: "Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen." 20:5: "[John] bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in." 20:6 "Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen."

Does it strike you as odd that John spends so much time talking about the wrappings? Why is that? I think, for him, this was evidence of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus' body had been stolen—by grave robbers or by his own disciples—why would they take the time to unwrap it in the tomb? It would have been much faster just to pick it up and carry it away than to go through that

hassle and be seen carting off a naked corpse. The fact that the body was gone but that the linens were still there is evidence to John that Jesus was raised back to life and that someone—presumably an angel—took the time to unwrap this resurrected man from the shrouds of death. [Begin unwrapping]

And he seems to have taken his time about it. The linens are not thrown on the ground in haste; they are lying there—apparently resting upon the stone shelf. The strips that bound Jesus in death had been removed and bound him no longer. You know the old saying about not airing your dirty linen in public? That is exactly what Jesus does: he airs his dirty linen in public, so that the world would know that the grave did not hold him any longer.

And that head napkin... special attention is given to that. It has been removed, folded up and laid neatly in a place separate from the other strips. You know what goes through my mind? Mary raised her son well. She taught him when he got up in the morning to make his bed. And after Jesus arose—and before he stepped out to greet the world—he made his bed. He folded that piece of cloth that had covered his face in death and closed his jaw because he was about to step out of the grave, open his mouth again and pronounce words of life that would change the world forever.

Once when I was in Jerusalem I was sitting in the courtyard outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the ancient church built around the empty tomb of Jesus. Others in my group were still exploring, so I pulled out my guitar and began to play. An African man sat down next to me and asked if he could play. I handed my guitar to him. He began to sing, and I joined in. A small crowd gathered and there, as we sat near the empty tomb of Jesus, we worshiped the Messiah whom the world killed—but who refused to stay dead. It was a wonderful celebration of Christian brothers who lived half a world apart but who, in that moment, were united in worship of the risen Christ.

Until, that is, the guards came over. They told us to stop singing; that it was the Sabbath. I told him, “We are Christians, and we are singing songs to Jesus.” The head man leaned threateningly closer to both of us, wagged his finger and said very clearly: “No worship!” Ah... it all became clear. It was okay to spend our money to come, visit this site and look at ancient historical buildings and relics, but we were to treat this courtyard like a museum not a place of worship: a tourist site, a mummy room without the mummy, not holy ground where the greatest act of empowering love in all of history swept into the world and changed it forever.

I wonder... are there some here this morning who see this as a gathering of religious relics? Who view the Easter story as a collection of Christian legends? But who don't really buy it? Don't really believe the tomb was empty? Who think that somewhere in an undiscovered grave in Jerusalem lies the mummified body of Jesus? Of course, if you're right, then this is all a sham. We ought to close up

shop, sell the building to the Parks District, and go home. But John begs to differ. He says, "Look at the strips of cloth! Look at them! These were the bondage of death. But God stripped them away and brought death back to life."

You know, we don't have any hard evidence to look at this morning. The empty tomb is thousands of miles away. The linen strips have long since disintegrated. But there is another piece of evidence that Jesus is still in the unbinding business. There are things in your own life that are bound up in death... a relationship that is dying, habits that are killing you, health that is deteriorating, business that has one leg in the grave. No matter how you struggle, it seems that the bonds that wrap and trap you only draw tighter.

Even more puzzling, you may feel like everything in your life is as you planned, and yet inside, you have no peace... no real hope, no real life. If this day is just a religious museum-piece—if the mummy of Jesus lies hidden somewhere in the soils of Jerusalem—well you are in trouble aren't you? But what if there is more to this day?

You know, earlier in John's gospel, he told a story about a man named Lazarus. How many have ever heard of Lazarus? He was Jesus' friend who got sick and died while Jesus was out of town. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb for four days. Hopeless! But when Jesus, the Lord of Life, called out his name, "Lazarus, Come Forth!" ... Lazarus did. Listen to what happened next: "The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and set him free.'"

Here's the best news you will hear today: whatever it is that binds you right now, whatever it is that wraps you in death and darkness and despair... the risen Jesus is the one who can unbind you and set you free. Only Jesus. And if you will take the risk of inviting him to do that, it might be all the evidence you need that Jesus Christ really is alive.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. None of Jesus' disciples were with Jesus to the very end. How does that make you feel? Does it raise a time in your own life where Christians disappointed you? Talk about that.
2. Why does John seem to make a big deal about the grave clothes of Jesus? How does this contrast with the Lazarus story? (ch 11)
3. Are there times when you treat Jesus as a museum piece? A historical relic instead of a living God? Why, do you think?
4. What is one thing that you need to be "unbound" from right now, something that only Jesus can do?