

JESUS HAD TO RISE

9 They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

That day began in darkness and grief, but then came confusion, bewilderment, and misunderstanding. When the disciples of Jesus woke up, if they had much sleep at all on that Sunday morning, it was just two days by our way of thinking, three in theirs, since Jesus had suffered so horribly on the cross and died. His burial left them with a sense of loss even more profound than when one of us loses the closest loved one, a spouse or a child, because they believed he had been the Savior-- how could the Savior die?

Then Mary Magdalene came with her news. She ran into Peter and John, and said: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" At this point, Mary had no idea what had happened. Who did she think had taken the Lord's body? Why would the Romans take it anywhere? They were guarding it. Why would the Jewish leadership take it anywhere? They had sealed the tomb to prevent just this sort of thing. The apostles hadn't taken it. Did she think that Joseph and Nicodemus, the men who buried Jesus, had moved his body?

By choosing the words she did, she gave the impression that the Lord's body was missing, stolen, grave-robbed; moved. Later on, she would ask the man she thought was the gardener where he had taken the body.

Peter and John ran out of the city to the tomb. Of course, John uses his careful roundabout way of naming himself, which is not to use his name but to call himself "the one Jesus loved." In this case, the one Jesus loved outran his old fishing partner Peter, but Peter was the one who stuck his head inside the tomb first: No Jesus.

And we come to the issue of Jesus' graveclothes that they saw. The condition of Jesus' tomb was this: Inside this carved, smallish cave, was a slab of stone with enough room inside for two people to lay out a body. Behind the slab there would, according to burial customs of the day, there would have been a depression or shallow pit, so that when a second burial took place, the bones of the first occupant would be pushed back and fall into this channel or pit. And this would go on and on as more and more people were buried there. But Jesus was the first person ever buried in this grave, and there was no evidence of his body at all, except for the graveclothes. These consisted of linen wrapping, not unlike those of a mummy in Egypt although in some cases they might be more like what we would think of as a bathrobe with extra wrappings. These, John says, were just "lying there." There is no other description, such as they had been rolled up like bandages or folded or anything else. They might very well have simply fallen down onto the stone slab when the occupant inside the bandages disappeared from the tomb.

In contrast to these, there was also the linen head cloth that was lying by itself, separate from everything, and folded. The evidence of these two different states of the burial cloths teaches us two things about what happened:

Jesus had risen from the dead. His spiritual body, that is to say his resurrected body, was no longer bound by earthly laws. He could appear in a locked room without unlocking the door. He could descend physically into hell to proclaim his victory over the devil. He could abandon his graveclothes without stopping to unwrap them. They simply fell down as he had no more need for them.

Secondly, in his risen state, he was no longer bothered by any earthly troubles. What convict, escaping from prison, would change out of his prison clothes and then stop to fold them? But Jesus, escaping the bonds of death, had nothing to fear from any enemies at all, seen or unseen. Triumphant over the devil and even over the grave, he could pause to attend to a little detail like folding his headcloth.

I will admit that I used to consider this a moment where Jesus showed that, still fully human but risen from the dead, he was remembering his mother's lesson to fold his clothes and make his bed when he got up in the morning. Now I think that another explanation is that he shows his power over death and his victory by being able to laugh at his enemies without any fear or concern of any kind. Psalm 2 says: "The One enthroned in heaven laughs, the LORD scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill" (Ps. 2:4-6).

But we've left Peter and John staring at dropped linen. What John says next is this: "The other disciple, the one who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed."

What did he believe? Did he believe that Mary was right when she claimed that someone had taken the Lord's body away? No. John now saw and believed at last that Jesus had risen from the dead. But John, remember, is the one who wrote this Gospel, and he isn't very proud of this moment, not as far as his own performance is concerned. If he truly had understood, then he would have believed Jesus had risen as soon as the Third Day had dawned, or at least as soon as Mary's report of an empty tomb had come. But he admits, he had to go and see from himself, and only then did he believe.

The trouble was what he admits next, as the author of the Gospel: **They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise.**

But it was necessary for Jesus to rise, and impossible for him not to rise. It could not have happened that Jesus Christ might have remained dead in the tomb.

In the 1990s, a British TV personality was making a documentary about the Holy Land and he reported that when they visited a tomb outside Jerusalem, their guide showed the name "Joshua" or Jesus inscribed on the stone. Now, that was a very common name, and to be clear, the date of the tomb was in question, but when the TV host wondered aloud, "Could this be the body of Christ here in the tomb?" He was amazed that someone in their little group replied, "Well no, it can't be Jesus. Jesus is in heaven." Even with the Gospels and the many eyewitness that Paul lists to Jesus' resurrection-- more than 500-- the world still cannot accept the resurrection, or that Jesus had to rise.

But what do the Scriptures say?

Psalm 16:10, “You will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see decay.”

Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son, today I have become your Father.”

Psalm 110: “You are a priest forever.”

Genesis 49: “The scepter will not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes-- the one the scepter belongs to.

Isaiah 9: “He will reign on David’s throne from that time on and forever.”

Isaiah 11: “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”

Also Micah 5, Zechariah 9, 12 and 14, not to mention Isaiah 53, and in Exodus, the account of the Burning Bush. All of these and many other prophecies point to the living Christ, living forever in the resurrection and promising the resurrection to everyone who puts their faith in him.

Why did this have to be? Well, there are two answers to this question. First: What have happened if he had not been raised?

At best, **(1)** we would wonder and face our own deaths without any confidence or comfort, **(2)** the grave would not be conquered, and therefore **(3)** death would also not be conquered, **(4)** the devil’s power would not be ended, **(5)** sin would still reign in the world, **(6)** we would still be in our sins, under the power the devil, death and the grave, and to each and every temptation that comes along, **(7)** our trust in Jesus would be pitiful, delusional, ludicrous, and all but the most naïve would have given up on Jesus centuries ago. In fact, **(8)** Christianity would have died and blown away with the desert sands many centuries ago with hardly a trace remaining, right along with Arianism, Baalism, Docetism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, Sabellianism, Branch-Davidianism and the hundreds of other post-sacrificial idolatrous cults and religious fads that have come and gone over the years.

But secondly, this had to be, Jesus had to rise, because Scripture commands it. And the command is there for our comfort, for our forgiveness, and for our salvation.

Stand there once again with Peter and John, peering into the empty tomb. The graveclothes are there, left behind by the Risen Lord who no longer needed them or was bound by them. You and I have faith in our risen Lord. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are released from many earthly things and are no longer bound by them. The whisperings of the devil don’t need to bother us any longer. Let go of those things in your life that bind you to the devil, to death, to the grave. Jesus conquered them, and with the help of the Holy Spirit you and I can let go of them, too. The resurrection means victory over the grave and over the devil, and it also means a new life in this lifetime, as well-- a new life of walking with Jesus every day, in loving submission and obedience to our heavenly Father, all because Jesus died and rose again-- because he had to, for our sakes.