

## The Folded Napkin: An Easter Lesson

### *A Powerful Lesson in a Small Detail*

### *John 20:1-9*

Intro: "Ever talked to someone who gave you way too many details?"  
-- Not so with God!! -- EVERY DETAIL MATTERS

#### I. Why Did Jesus Fold the Napkin. (Read)

*I never noticed this before. Have you?*

*The Gospel of [John 20:7](#) 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.*

*Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.*

*She said, 'They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and I don't know where they have put him!' Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb to see. The other disciple out ran Peter and got there first. He stooped and looked in and saw the linen cloth lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying to the side*

*Is that important?*

*Absolutely!*

*Is it really significant?*

*Yes!*

*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 was 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 beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because...*

*The folded napkin meant, 'I'm coming back!'*

**HE IS COMING BACK!!!**

## II. Is This Story True???

A. First ... the “ancient” custom has not been verified ...

... even among Jewish rabbis & historians.

B. Second ... The term “napkin” (KJV)

> NIV: “burial cloth”                      > NKJV: “handkerchief” (note: “face cloth”)

> Greek word: “*saudarion*” – comes from Latin for “sweat”

-- meanings:            (1) “sweat cloth” (towel for wiping the brow)  
                                  (2) “grave cloth” (used to cover a corpse’s face)

> A folded napkin on a table would **never** be linked to a grave cloth!!

-- imagine what the disciple’s thoughts must have been!!!

They wouldn’t see a folded death veil and think of a napkin on a servant’s table!

> There was NO NEED for a symbolic message when the greatest message ever given was clearly evident ... Jesus was NOT IN THE TOMB!

C. The Message of the Empty Tomb.

> What do you think is the message of the empty tomb? *discuss*

(“I’m coming back.” – no) (“Death is defeated.” – yes)

> If the napkin-analogy were valid, then the message would really be, “I’m returning to the table,” which, in this case would mean: THE GRAVE

> Jesus had not yet ascended to heaven (Acts 1). He would soon appear to all of the disciples and hundreds more. So ... why would he need to leave a sign when he could simply tell them?

## III. What Difference Does It Make Whether This “Story” Is True?

... *I mean, isn’t it true that He is coming back?*

A. The angels made it clear that Christ would return. (Acts 1:11) -- The conclusion of the folded napkin story agrees with Scripture, but that doesn’t mean it’s the intended meaning of John 20:7.

B. What is the danger of misinterpretation?

(1) Getting the meaning wrong. (not the problem here)

(2) Missing the intended meaning.

So ... if the folded napkin didn’t say “I’m coming back,” then what DID it mean?  
(remember, every detail matters!)

#### IV. So ... why did Jesus fold the napkin???

> To answer this mystery, let's look at CONTEXT.

Q: What reaction did Mary Magdalene have when she saw the stone rolled away?  
-- *Grave Robbers*

Q: Why didn't the disciples draw the same conclusion when they looked in the tomb?  
-- *Because of the folded face cloth!*

> The most logical and scriptural reason for the folded face cloth?  
-- An orderly arrangement, not in disarray as would have resulted from a grave robbery.

> Another possible reason: Larger Context – see John 11:43-44

Q: What is different about Lazarus' resurrection and Jesus' resurrection?  
-- *Lazarus came out of the tomb wearing grave clothes; Jesus didn't*

*-- Significance? Lazarus' resurrection only delayed his ultimate death ... i.e. "He was raised to die again." Jesus, on the other hand, completely defeated death (as opposed to "cheating death"). He was raised, never to die – a picture of our future bodily resurrection!*

*NKJV Study note: In Lazarus' resurrected condition, someone was needed to remove the burial clothes – he couldn't do it on his own. Jesus, by contrast, apparently "passed through" the grave clothes – an ability of a glorified body (similar to the closed door in John 20:26). Thus, the difference of the two resurrected bodies (one glorified, one mortal) is indicated in the presence – and absence – of grave clothes.*

#### **Summary.**

So, why is v.20 necessary and what does it mean?

1. The body of Jesus wasn't taken by grave robbers – it was arranged and ordered by God.
2. Jesus was raised from death, completely defeating the power of death, and showing us what awaits us after death.
3. Jesus never appeared in grave clothes. Satan thought he had defeated Jesus by killing him; however, in folding the death cloth, Jesus demonstrates control (folding) over the very article which signified his death.  
... or, to put it plainly ...

**Satan clothed Jesus with death ... but Jesus took off the clothes that bound him and left them folded on a shelf! Hallelujah!**