

April 5, 2026

Easter Sunday

“Not Quite an Empty Tomb”

John 20:1-11

Intro:

Easter Sunday is a busy day. I’m not just talking about the family gatherings with all the extra cooking, or the frantic setting up of Easter egg hunts for the kids. I’m talking about the first Easter Sunday – that was a busy day!

Many of us have grown up with an image of a calm and quiet Easter morning – the women coming to the tomb in the early morning when the sun was barely cresting the horizon, walking quietly and talking in hushed tones. But I think it was more chaotic. Follow with me for a moment back to that glorious day almost two thousand years ago....

The chaos doesn’t start with the women. It starts with the stone in front of Jesus’ tomb being rolled away. That would have been noisy, heavy stone grinding against the rocky ground. This was a supernatural act as well, so there was probably some sort of thunderous noise accompanying it. Whatever that sounded like, it was enough to cause the seasoned Roman soldiers who were standing guard at the tomb to abandon their post and high-tail it right back to their superiors. I can’t see their retreat as being an orderly or calm in the face of such a display over the power of gravity holding that stone in place. Maybe the soldiers saw angelic beings moving that stone, maybe they only saw the stone move, but either way it certainly messed with them.

Then we have the women. Imagine the confusion and chaos that they experienced when they arrived to discover the open tomb. Maybe they passed the panicked soldiers fleeing the scene and sped up their own pace in fearful concern. I imagine a scene of chaos as they arrive and begin to frantically search for where the body of Jesus had been taken, or to find anyone who could act as a witness. Confusion and probably a fair measure of fear would have settled on

them as they could not make any sense of what was going on. Then they have the two “men” – read angels – rebuke them for their confusion and send them back to the disciples to tell them that Jesus is no longer there. Again, following that instruction would not have been a stately affair. They would have run as fast and as undignified as they could back to where Peter and John and the others were, to tell them what they had witnessed.

What had they witnessed? They probably tried to make sense of things as they ran along the road, maybe arguing and hypothesizing with one another. It would have been a conversation frequently punctuated by exclamations of “I don’t know”, and “Well, I don’t know either!”.

And once their news is delivered, more chaos would have ensued. I can’t imagine Mary and the rest just calmly walking into the house and announcing the news of the empty tomb. They would have rushed in, interrupted whatever conversation was going on, and all talking at once, spilled the news. It would have taken a few moments of everyone trying to get clarity and talking over one another before the full story was understood. When that happens, Peter and (presumably) John rush out of the house and run as fast as they can back to the tomb to check things out for themselves. Once they get there, they look into the tomb and see that it is empty. They wonder at this. They question it. They debate with one another. Mary, at the least, shows back up on the scene to add more confusion to what is already a mystery with seemingly no clear answer.

There is a lot going on. And in the midst of all that going on, it is quite understandable that they miss something. Matthew and Mark seem to have missed it. Luke and John make a passing note of it. The tomb is not completely empty. Oh yes, it is empty of the body of Jesus – and everyone eventually catches on to the significance there, but there is something still left in the tomb. The grave clothes that Jesus’ body was wrapped in were still there. Luke notes it more like an aside. John’s Gospel gives a little more attention by describing where the linens were.

The Grave Clothes:

It is an understandable thing to miss. After all, how many of us miss that detail every year as we read and re-read the Easter account? Why would we linger on them? They are not the main feature – it is Jesus, or rather the lack of Jesus, that is important. And then he appears to Mary and to the disciples on the Emmaus Road. It is the risen saviour that we want to see and we want to know about and we want to celebrate.

But if those left-behind linens had no significance, then John for sure would not have mentioned them.

Those linens left on the stone slab help us to realize that Jesus has been bodily raised to life. But not just raised to life, raised to life anew. Jesus' new body was raised *through* those linens. Perhaps you will recall that just a couple of weeks earlier, another fellow had been raised from the dead – Jesus' friend Lazarus. In that instance, the risen body of Lazarus stepped out from the tomb still wrapped in the grave clothes. He had to be helped out of them. He was raised from the dead, certainly, but he was only raised back into the finite physical life that every human knows, and he would die again. Lazarus did not leave death behind; he carried it out of the tomb with him.

Jesus left death behind. In Jesus' resurrection, death was defeated. He did not carry death out of the tomb when He left it. This is significant for those of us who believe, because it gives us confidence that we won't have to face the eternal permanence of death, because Jesus has won that battle for us. Our current bodies will expire, but in the last days we will be raised with a new body – raised anew as Jesus was raised anew.

So, the left-behind linens are a symbol of eternal hope.

But there is another point of significance for us in those cast-aside cloths. When Jesus went to the cross, he didn't go empty-handed. He carried with Him all the sins of the world.

Remember the words from Isaiah 53:4-6:

⁴Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;

it was our sorrows that weighed him down.

And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,

a punishment for his own sins!

⁵But he was pierced for our rebellion,

crushed for our sins.

He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed.

⁶All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.

We have left God's paths to follow our own.

Yet the Lord laid on him

the sins of us all.

When Jesus went into that tomb, he wasn't wrapped just with linen clothes, he was wrapped with the weight of our sins. When Jesus was raised anew, He was raised free from those sins. He had carried them away from us, into the place of the dead, and left them there. His raised body didn't need to carry them any longer, and because of that we also don't need to carry them.

Recall the words from Ephesians that we read earlier – “throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life...(and) Instead let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy.”

Conclusion:

Jesus cast aside the sinful nature that had been laid upon Him. When we choose to give our lives to following Him, we are also casting aside our old sinful nature and being born again – born anew with a new life and ultimately, in eternity, a new body that will be clothed not in the linens of death, but in the linens of life.

So yes, the tomb was not quite an empty tomb. Jesus was no longer there, but in that tomb was left behind sin and death. And in that tomb is where those things should remain.

This is the Good News – Hallelujah, and Amen.

Let's pray.