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**A MESSAGE FROM THE TOMB**

So, you're probably wondering why you were given a handkerchief or napkin when you came into worship today.

- Well, it's not because today's message is so sad that you'll need it dab your eyes or blow your nose.
- It's not so that you can wave it in the air and cheer (though as a preacher, it would be nice to get that kind of encouragement during the sermon).
  - Rather, it's a reminder of a legend that can help us to better understand a detail in the resurrection story.
  - and hopefully might serve as a reminder to all of us of what this day can mean for our lives.

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There's a supposed tradition that goes back to biblical times.

- And it has to do with fancy dinners given by the wealthy.
  - JESUS, on occasion, was invited to such dinners such as the one given by Simon the Pharisee who failed to properly welcome HIM,
    - or ones that took place at the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary,
    - or one hosted by Simon the Leper.
- It is told that at dinners like this, people would recline at the table, sort of laying on their elbow with their feet pointed away from the food.
- Each guest would have plate on which to place their food and a cup from which to drink.
  - And each would have a cloth napkin.
- Now, from time-to-time, a guest would get up and go elsewhere.
  - They might go to sit close by and talk to another guest.
  - Or, he might go outside to relieve himself.
- But when he got up to move around, they often intended to return to his place and eat more.
  - Servants wouldn't know if that was his intention or not, and this is where the napkin comes in.
    - If the person was done eating, he would wipe his hands, beard, and mouth, then leave the wadded up the napkin, letting the servant know that his dishes could be cleared away.
    - But if he planned to come back to his spot, he would fold his napkin and leave by his plate, and thus let the servant know that he would return.

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So, what does this have to do with JESUS and the empty tomb?

- You might think this practice would have more to do with the Last Supper, for example, or something like that.
  - But what does it have to do with the resurrection?
    - Well, I'm glad you asked.

If we look again at today's gospel reading, there is a small detail that I want to point out.

- It has to do with John 20:6-7.
- Here we find these words in our reading:

*Then Simon Peter came along behind him (John) and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around JESUS' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.*

Various versions have this translated in different ways.

- Some say that the napkin *“was lying in its place,”* as we have in our text today.
    - Others say that the napkin *“was rolled up in its place.”*
    - Another says that the cloth *“was wrapped together in its place.”*
    - Still others say that the napkin *“was folded up in its place.”*
  - So, when JESUS left this napkin folded up and apart from the rest of the graveclothes, HE was leaving a message,
    - a message from the grave.
    - JESUS was saying, “I’m coming back.”
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Now, let me say that this story of the folded cloth at a Jewish dinner is not true.

- In JESUS’ day, people ate with their hands and wiped their beards with bread.
  - There simply is no biblical or archaeological support for such a practice of folding a cloth at a meal.
    - This story of the folded dinner napkin was just made up as a “Let’s Help GOD Out,” story, if you will.
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So, let me tell you another story that has also arisen to explain the folded cloth.

- It is said that during JESUS’ time, a carpenter could let a the one for whom he was working know a project was done with a fold cloth.

A hanky like this was called a “sweat cloth.”

- Imagine on a hot afternoon, a carpenter completed the last pieces of the job on which he was working.
- Finally, he takes a welcome drink of cool water, pours some over his face, chest, and arms to clean himself.
  - Then he takes a nearby towel, pats himself dry, and then carefully folds the cloth in half and then in half again.
  - Finally, he sets the towel on the finished work and leaves, so that whoever comes to inspect the labor will understand that the work is finished.

Not quite as great a message as, “I’m coming back,” but still a good, understandable message: “My work is finished.”

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But, again, not true.

- First of all, carpenters, like workers today, simply told their patron that the work was done.
  - Second, though HIS earthly father was a carpenter, JESUS was not.
    - HE was a rabbi and studied for eighteen years to become one from the time HE was twelve or thirteen. (If you want to know more about that, ask me sometime.)
    - HE had HIS own rabbinic school of twelve followers and everyone called HIM RABBI or TEACHER.
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So, why a fold or rolled cloth or towel or napkin laid aside from the other grave clothes?

- We don’t know.
- But it doesn’t mean JESUS didn’t leave a message for us in the tomb.
  - HE did.

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I have a good friend called Ed McGee.

- Ed has been to the Holy Land three times.
- And each time he is there, he goes to Jerusalem to see the tomb of JESUS.

Now there are three places that claim to be that tomb.

I've seen two of them.

- One is in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the Edicule, which is a chapel constructed in the 300's by Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena (or really the workers she hired to do so).
  - The Edicule houses the stone on which JESUS was laid in death.
- The second tomb is called the "Garden Tomb."
  - It was discovered about 1850 near a cliff that, at the time, looked like a skull.
  - Golgotha, the place where JESUS was crucified, means the "skull."

One time, when Ed was in Jerusalem, it was rainy, so it was tremendously crowded in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

- The lines were so long, it would have been precious hours before Ed could get into the Edicule.
  - So, Ed went instead to the Garden Tomb.

Because it was raining, there were very few people at this outdoor garden place.

- The owner of the garden happened to be there and he offered to take Ed down to the tomb himself.
- As he approached the tomb, with the stone rolled to the side, the owner stopped Ed for a moment and said something.
  - "You can go to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or you can come here to the Garden Tomb, or you can go to the other one, but you'll find the same thing.
  - "They're all empty."

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The message that JESUS left us in that tomb was the grave clothes and nothing else.

- This message is the promise of life after death.
- Some claimed that the Jews stole HIS body to prevent HIS disciples from taking it and claiming that JESUS had risen.
  - But why didn't they produce HIS body?
- Some claimed that the Romans took it.
  - But why didn't they produce it?
- Some claimed that JESUS' own disciples took HIS body to promote the resurrection story, but then, knowing HE was still dead, why were they willing to die for what they knew was a lie?

The truth is that JESUS is risen, come back from the tomb.

- HE appeared to Mary Magdalene, and then the disciples, and then to over 550 people.
  - JESUS came back, and HE promised to come back again.

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It would be nice if it was a dinner napkin, folded to say that HE'S coming back.

- And I'd like you to take this napkin home and put it in a place where you will see it each day.
  - Let it remind you that JESUS promised to come back and HE did.
  - Let it assure that JESUS promised to come back again and HE will.
  - Let it help you to focus your life on all that JESUS has to offer and does.
    - Let this napkin be the promise that brings joy and purpose to your life—a true message from the tomb: HE is risen!