

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 17, 2022
Scripture: John 20:1-18

Sermon: The Folded Napkin

A Sunday school teacher was asking her six-year-olds about the meaning of Easter. “Children,” she said, “Do you know why we celebrate Easter?”

A little girl raised her hand. “Yes Jenny,” said the teacher. Jenny said, “Is Easter when we put on costumes and go trick-or-treating?” “No, Jenny. That’s Halloween. Does anyone else know?”

A little boy yelled, “It’s when we set off fireworks!” “No Jimmy, that’s 4th of July. Anybody else?”

A shy little girl in the back said, “Easter is when Jesus died.” The teacher replied, “That’s right Shauna. And what happened to Jesus that makes Easter special?” “Well, he died and got buried. And every Easter he comes out. And if he sees his shadow there’s 6 more weeks of winter.”

You’ve probably heard that joke before, but the sad part is many people do not know what the true meaning of Easter is all about. Even though we celebrate Easter with baskets and chocolate eggs, and we dye eggs and hide the eggs, that is not what Easter is about either.

Easter is all about the hope of forgiveness and eternal life that comes from the Resurrection of Jesus. Easter is about hope because of the empty tomb and the linen cloths lying there! God is in the business of hope and turning death into life! The message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is about the hope that God wants to bring to our lives and salvation in knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior and King.

The Gospel of John, chapter 20, tells the Easter story of what happened that morning when God did a new thing. While it was still dark that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. She notices the stone has been moved and thinks something

happened to Jesus. She runs to tell the disciples and finds Peter and the disciple John and tells them that someone has taken Jesus, and she doesn't know where they have put him. Mary doesn't understand what has happened and doesn't know what to do next.

The disciples still didn't come to the realization that Jesus had been raised from the dead like he told them he would.

Like Mary, the two disciples ran to the tomb. John arrives at the tomb first but waits to enter. And unlike the four-day dead Lazarus, who stumbled out of his tomb with all his burial wrappings still on, Jesus has left his linen wrappings lying there.

Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times in the Courtyard the night of Jesus' arrest, is so excited, he goes inside the tomb and discovers that the tomb is indeed empty, the linen wrappings are lying there and the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings.

Jesus, the baby who was born in a stable and wrapped in swaddling cloths, had grown up and died on the cross for everyone. Again, Jesus was wrapped in cloths and laid in a tomb.

Now the tomb seems to be empty, and the cloths were lying there waiting to be discovered.

Why did Jesus fold the linen burial cloth after his resurrection? 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.

In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, we need to understand a little about the Hebrew tradition of the 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 the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating.

The servant would not dare touch the table until the Master was finished. Now if the Master was finished eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his mouth and hands and toss the napkin onto the table. The

servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, "I'm finished."

But if the Master got up from the table, 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!"

The folded napkin and linen cloth in the empty tomb of Jesus can tell us that Jesus Christ, our Savior, is "not finished." Jesus is **coming back** as he has promised us.

Jesus, our Risen King, is coming back for his faithful servants and we need to be ready for his return.

In our scripture lesson Mary is standing outside of the tomb still weeping and she enters the tomb. Mary finds two angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. Angels were a part of Jesus' birth as well as his resurrection. The angels ask her why she is crying. Mary then has a conversation with the angels telling them she isn't sure where they have taken Jesus.

As she turns to leave, she sees someone standing there and thinks he is the gardener. Jesus asks the same question as the angels, "Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" As soon as Jesus calls her by her name, "Mary!" she realizes it is Jesus.

Mary, as well as all of us, needs to realize that this is not the end of the story but the beginning. New ministry is beginning for all who love Jesus and know he is coming back.

Jesus is asking us the same question this morning. Who are we looking for? Is Jesus calling our name this Easter morning?

In the death and resurrection of Jesus we are experiencing a new creation, "everything old has passed away and behold everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Jesus sends Mary out of the garden rejoicing. She is sent out to tell everyone the darkness has not overcome; the Word made flesh has overcome the darkness.

“The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” *(John 1: 4-5)*

Mary’s message should be clear to us today as it was all those years ago on Resurrection morning to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” *(John 20:18)*

Have you seen the Lord? Have you heard him call your name?

Her message declares to us a new beginning because He lives, and He is coming back again.

Jesus is not dead he is alive!

Jesus is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!