

## Napkin Nonsense

If you've had access to e-mail over the past decade or so, I'm quite sure that you've encountered a *popular forward* that always makes the rounds this time of year. As a pastor, I receive this forwarded e-mail at least three times every year in the weeks leading up to Easter Sunday. Everyone wants to share with the pastor. This particular e-mail has to do with the folded napkin neatly placed in the empty tomb. It goes like this:

*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. Is that important? You'd better believe it! Is that significant? 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 servant knew that the folded napkin meant, "I'm not finished yet." The folded napkin meant, "I'm coming back!"*

*He is Coming Back!*

Well...not to be the *buzzkill* on such a big day, **but this is a bunch of garbage!** Let us begin by saying that no such master/servant tradition has ever existed in the Jewish world—*ever*. In fact, the very first reference anyone can find regarding this alleged tradition is dated 2007, and it's found—where else?—but on the Internet. This is like looking at DaVinci's "Last Supper" painting, or worse yet, the book/movie "The DaVinci Code," and taking it as historical proof that

Jesus and the disciples all ate at a long table with chairs and plates and forks and spoons and napkins, all facing the same direction, conveniently facing the camera. This is simply a result of somebody reading their soft and fluffy translation of Scripture and applying their *own personal, Lifetime Channel, Oprah Winfrey interpretation*. Does it make you feel good? Does it give you a warm and fuzzy feeling? Perhaps. Is it true? **Not one bit; at least, not the interpretation.**

So...why was the facecloth purposely folded and set aside from the rest of the burial shrouds? And notice how I've worded this: *facecloth*. I know that some translations say "napkin," but that's only because that was about the size of the cloth. The original Greek word—*soudarion*—translates simply as "sweat cloth" or "handkerchief." It is a cloth, ***about the size of a napkin***, used specifically for wiping perspiration from the face, wiping the nose, or in the case of death and burial, used for binding the face of a corpse; a facecloth/covering. This is the same *soudarion* spoken of with Lazarus when Jesus raised him from the dead. Jesus calls out to Lazarus to arise, and Lazarus comes out of the tomb, hands and feet bound up with wrappings, and his face bound up a *separate* wrapping/cloth—a *soudarion*.

*"Okay, fine...so this is not a napkin like we understand it. This is not a napkin that would be used for eating. It's nothing more than a facecloth/covering that every Jewish person was buried with. That still doesn't explain why it was folded so neatly!"* Well...as I said, the e-mail is a bunch of hooey. There is no Jewish tradition—*ever*—regarding a master-servant boy relationship and some ***secret napkin-folding code***. Folks: Don't over-think this! The meaning to this is actually quite simple.

Why does St. John make a point of letting us know that the facecloth was purposefully and neatly folded and set aside on the burial bench? ***So that there would be no doubt that this was not a robbery!*** Remember: One of the biggest concerns with the Jewish leaders was that someone would sneak in and steal Jesus' body from the tomb and then claim that He rose from the dead. This is why they get Roman guards posted and the tomb sealed. No one was to get in. **No one.**

How many of you have ever witnessed the ***aftermath of a robbery?*** It's not pretty, is it? Thieves aren't very nice and neat and orderly, especially when they're worried about getting caught. ***They tear the place up.*** Drawers get dumped, furniture gets upended. It's a mess. Now think about this for a moment: If you were attempting to steal the body of Jesus and you have the heads of the Jewish government and the Roman army against you, how much time would you take in trying to pull off your caper? How nice and neat and tidy would you be if you knew that getting caught meant a ***horrible and miserable death***, probably no different than the death suffered by the person whose body you're trying to steal? I

don't know about you, but no one would have to tell me to hurry up, and being neat and tidy would be the last thing on my mind!

And yet...that's just it. *Someone did take their time.* Someone was *very* orderly and deliberate in taking the time to fold up and neatly set aside that face covering. Someone wanted everyone else to know that this was no robbery. This someone, after descending into Hell to proclaim total and eternal victory—*body and soul complete*—to all those foolish unbelievers, *calmly, confidently, and majestically* strolled out of the tomb. Can you imagine the Roman soldiers' surprise? They were guarding against anyone getting in. I bet they never anticipated anyone getting out!

*“Okay pastor, I get what you're saying, but you can't deny what the e-mail ends up saying—Jesus is coming back again.”* Yes! Jesus is coming again, in all His glory to judge both the living and the dead. *But...that's not what the folded facecloth meant.* That's not at all what Jesus was trying to convey when He took the time to neatly fold His death shroud before walking out of the tomb alive and well. Those are the two dots that somebody wrongly connected. That's what somebody wanted it to mean.

This brings us to the good Lutheran question: *What does this mean? What does all this mean for us today? Why take the time to focus on such a small point of Scripture so early in the morning?* My fellow redeemed: Your Lord cared about the smallest little details when it pertained to our salvation. Nothing was taken for granted or left to chance. Everything He did was for us and for our salvation, right down to the smallest detail like taking the time to fold His own death mask. Think about that the next time you're struggling and you think that maybe God has forgotten or forsaken you. Nothing is unimportant or trivial when it comes to you and your salvation. God knows and cares about even the smallest little details in your life.

You know, in a way, this smallest of details is “*sacramental-ish*” when you think about it. This little folded facecloth is something *real and tangible* we can wrap our faith around. The apostles are eyewitnesses. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, they recorded exactly what they saw. This was no robbery. This was no caper. This was the miraculous, victorious resurrection of Almighty God Himself. This was the Lord of Life laughing at death as He casually rubbed His victory in its *pathetic, vanquished face*.

Folks: This is your victory today. This is not some kind of *Hallmarky, Lifetime Channel* kind of thing. This is eternal victory. This is Almighty God at work—for you. By virtue of your baptism into Christ, you too are victorious. The grave has no hold over you. Our death shroud has forever been removed and folded up in Christ. Through our baptism into Christ, we have been covered over,

not with the shroud of death, but with the white robe of Christ's perfect, victorious righteousness. We have been handed over, from death to life.

As we now begin this new day, *this eighth day of new creation in Christ*, may this blessed news of Christ's victory resurrect you anew—in heart, soul, and mind. May this Good News enliven you so that you too can *confidently and faithfully* go out into this world proclaiming the joy of salvation that was purchased and paid in full with the *life-saving, life-giving lifeblood* of Christ Jesus.

A blessed Easter to each and every one of you.

AMEN