

Easter



April 5, 2026

“The Case of the Face Cloth”

John 20:1-10

Today's Big Idea

When we look at the peculiar detail of the rolled-up face cloth in the tomb, we learn about Jesus and His plan both for the whole cosmos and for each of us.

The Shock Heard Round the World: Acts 3:21; Revelation 21:5; Ephesians 1:10; 1 Corinthians 15:28

The Left-Behind Graveclothes

The Jewish burial process in ancient near east

The mention of linen grave clothes: **Luke 24:12, John 20:5**; implied in Matthew: **Matthew 28:6**

An important detail as a counter to the alleged stolen body theory: **Matthew 28:13-15**

John's deliberate contrast with the raising of Lazarus story: **John 11:44**

This is not a *resuscitation* but a *resurrection* into a different kind of body

Noting the peculiar detail of the face cloth, rolled up/folded up in a place by itself: **John 20:7**

A side detail that reinforces eye witness account over legendary embellishment

A possible “eighth” sign in the book of John

The Action Related to the Face Cloth Reveals Something: Matthew 7:16-16

A characteristic of one who is methodical: *deliberate, purposeful*

A characteristic of one who tends to small details: *thorough, integrity*

A characteristic of one who is careful: *tender, gentle*

This Deliberate, Methodical Jesus as Pertains to the Story of the World

Jesus death was not unanticipated accident but was a carefully planned voluntary offering

A sign of the “first fruits” work begun: **1 Corinthians 15:20**

The eradication of evil: rolled up the old world power brokers like a scroll **Isaiah 34:4; Revelation 6:14**

The promise that it will be carried out to the last jot and tittle: nothing overlooked, swept under rug

The revealing of His face: life in the light of the glory of His face: **Revelation 22:4-5**

This Deliberate, Methodical Jesus as Pertains to the Story of Me

My small details matter to Jesus Who counts hairs and numbers sparrow: **Matthew 29:31**

The artifacts of our suffering are precious and handled tenderly: **Psalms 56:8**

He knows our names: doesn't deal with us *en masse*; carrying the lost sheep: **Luke 15:3-5**

Someone this powerful, and yet this intimate, can be trusted with your whole life!

Expanded

Introduction

The Lord be with you.

The **shot heard around the world** refers to the first shot fired of the Revolutionary War in 1775 marking the advent of democratic movements around the world, and coined in Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem *Concord Hymn*

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.*

*The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.*

Written and sung some 62 years later, in the hymn there is already a sense of the passing away of the moment, in danger of being forgotten. As they erect the **1836 Monument** to that moment, Emerson's prayer is that Time and Nature gently spare the shaft being raised.

In contrast to that fragility of that momentous moment for us, I note that today we celebrate Easter, what I call **the shock heard around the world**—a shocking event so cataclysmic, that the entire course of cosmic history was changed; the tectonic plates of reality so altered, that far from the danger of being forgotten, we can barely remember the world that came before.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, the world, the universe, the cosmos, all of reality, all beings in heaven and on earth, are moving toward the great restoration of all things as it says in **Acts 3:21**, the making of all things new as it says in **Revelation 21:5**, all things in heaven and earth being united in Christ as it says in **Ephesians 1:10**, when all things will be made subject to Jesus, who will subject all things to God the Father, that God may be **all in all**, as it says in **1 Corinthians 15:28**.

We are truly in an unimaginably good story that we can barely fathom, even though the world is shaking and evil continues its rampage of heartbreaking destruction. Even so, the days of evil and death are numbered. Because what we celebrate today, the resurrection of Jesus, really happened.

The Left-Behind Graveclothes

I want to look at the event of the resurrection through one single detail today. I want to don the hat and cloak of Sherlock Holmes and look at the left-behind graveclothes in the empty tomb and see

what we can distill from this one peculiar observation described in our Gospel reading today in such vivid detail. Also mentioned in Luke's account of the resurrection, and perhaps implied in Matthew's account, "come see where they laid Him." With Sherlock, then, I say: **the game is afoot!**

The burial process in ancient near east

Unlike their Greek and Roman neighbors that burned bodies after death—a sign that what really only mattered was spirit and not body, the Jews treated bodies with great respect, believing one day they would be raised again (**see Daniel 12:2**). Burials happened rapidly. Bodies were washed, wrapped either in a shroud (a large linen), or wrapped in linen strips, holding spices both as sign of honor and as mitigation of decomposing odor). Those with means would place bodies in cave-tombs, with the idea that after a year or so, after decomposition, the bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary, a continuation of honoring the body of the deceased. We see all of these typical features in the burial narrative of Jesus in **John 19:39-42**: 75 pounds of aloes and myrrh, wrapped in linens, laid in a cave-tomb.

The Graveclothes Remain Behind

When Peter goes into the tomb he sees the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth folded up and put in a place by itself: see **John 20:6-7**. Immediately I think of two reasons why John draws attention to this bit of detail. First, according to **Matthew 28:13-15** the Jewish leaders spread the report that the body of Jesus was stolen by His disciples. As unlikely as that story is at face value in light of the guard placed at the tomb to begin with, it is even more unlikely that the disciples would steal the body, but before running off with it, go through the cumbersome process of unwrapping the mass and mess of linens and spices. Wouldn't it have been more efficient to just carry out the wrapped body?

Second, John's account sets up a direct contrast with his story back in **chapter 11** of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the tomb, who had to be unwrapped and set free by other humans. In that account both the linen strips and the face cloth are deliberately mentioned (**see verse 44**). The contrast is emphasizing Lazarus was brought back to life in his old body (resuscitation) that would have to die yet again; something new and entirely different has happened to Jesus. He has risen though His graveclothes unaided into a different kind of life, resurrection life.

Now Let Us Focus In On The peculiar detail of the face cloth

It is rolled up/folded up in a place by itself: **John 20:7**. This is a side detail that reinforces eye witness account over made-up story or later legendary embellishment. It could have been sufficient to just mention the left behind grave clothes, but this detailed detail calls attention to itself with the characteristic of eye witness testimony. Further, John wants us to notice this. John's Gospel can be understood as a series of seven signs that reveal who Jesus is—God in the flesh come to save the world. I propose in particular that the attention given to the face cloth could be seen as the eight sign, the number eight alluding to the new creation!.

Actions Reveal Character

To plumb this meaning I begin by the commonsense recognition that actions reveal character. Habits reveal values and priorities. Fruit shows what kind of tree it is: **Matthew 7:16-18**. So here we

have an action, a fruit, a piece of evidence about the actor, Jesus. What does this deliberate action of taking time to roll up the face cloth and set it apart possible say about the character of Jesus?

- A characteristic of one who is methodical, like a scientist doing a controlled experiment: *purposeful*
- A characteristic of one who tends to small details, like a pilot or a pharmacist: *thorough, integrity*
- A characteristic of one who is careful, like a nurse or a mother: *tender, gentle*

This Deliberate, Methodical Jesus, As Pertains to the Unfolding Story of the World

First, note Jesus' death was not an unanticipated accident but was a carefully planned voluntary offering. Throughout Jesus' whole ministry we see his foreknowledge of His suffering, and His deliberate choices to grease the wheels that would ultimately lead to His arrest and crucifixion.

Second, the resurrection signals the beginning of the coming of the new age. Jesus is called the First fruits of the dead in **1 Corinthians 15:20**, meaning He has inaugurated the age of resurrection and restoration, and his VERY FIRST act as the resurrected one is to roll up His face cloth. When you think of it that way, Jesus is giving a prophetic sign to the world:

- The rolled up the old world enslaved to evil and death has begun, and perhaps He is evening drawing a link to the Scriptural image of **Is 34:4; Rev 6:14** where the evil power brokers of the world are being broken
- If the great campaign begins with such attention to almost insignificant detail, there is implied the assurance that the rest will be carried out to the last jot and tittle: nothing overlooked, swept under rug, everything accounted for every injustice answered, every name called, every shadow expelled.
- A sign of the end game: the revealing of His face: life in the light of the glory of His face (all that covers His face rolled up), as in the picture of **Revelation 22:4-5**

This Deliberate, Methodical Jesus, As Pertains to the Story of You and Me

- My small details matter to Jesus and are seen by Him, taken seriously: A God Who counts hairs and numbers sparrow: **Matthew 29:31**
- His gentleness is revealed in His tender care for the artifacts of our suffering, as they are precious: **Psalms 56:8** (tears in the bottle)
- And like he set apart the face cloth from the other linens, He know how to deal directly with EACH entity; He sets us apart from the others: doesn't deal with us as a mass blob; He knows our name

Conclusion

Someone this powerful, as to rise from the dead, but at the same time, this careful, and thoughtful, and thorough, and gentle, and meticulous, and intentional, this purposeful: You can trust Him with your life, with every aspect of your life, and He is inviting all of us to follow Him with fresh resolve and refreshed confidence today.