

# Death - the last taboo?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, John chapter 20. Okay, the task before me this evening, I suppose, is to speak to you about one of the most solemn and important subjects of them all this evening. Believe it or not, I need to speak to you about death. Now, a few years ago, I spoke about this, or spoke on this subject in a church a million miles away from here, and it wasn't London. It was even further away than that. And I began that sermon with that sort of old adage, that old quote about death being a taboo subject. You've heard that, haven't you? You know, death, the last taboo.

Now, that was true when I was preaching that sermon in that church a few years ago. I'm not actually convinced that that is true any longer. I'm sure you see what I mean. With the coronavirus, isn't it the case that our society has been faced with death in a new way? Our society has had to deal with death with new realism. Our society has had to face death in a way perhaps they have not had to do since perhaps, well, certainly not my lifetime, maybe since World War II. Now, as in all things, with death, you and I as Christians have to seek to adopt a biblical perspective on death, don't we? So I suppose the question that emerges for us tonight is this. Should you and I, should we be as scared of death and dying as our unbelieving neighbor? Should we? And if not, why not? Like, what is it that brings hope to the Christian in the face of our own mortality? What is our hope when we're faced with death? Well, to consider these things, what I want to do this evening for a short while is to look at the greatest event in all human history and to look at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me be a little bit more precise about it. This evening, what I want us to do is to consider a couple of details, two details about the resurrection of Jesus, two details that we learn from the gospel of John. And in the interests of transparency, let me say that we're looking at two details.

We will spend about 90% of our time in the first detail. So do not panic later on in the sermon when I announce we're on to our second point. Okay, so two details about the resurrection, but we'll spend the bulk of our time in the first. So if you've got a Bible, I think it's of benefit to all of us. If you have it open at John chapter 20, we'll try and pay as close attention to the text as is possible. Okay, now I've said we're looking at two details in the text. What would you expect me to do just now if I've said we're looking at two details? You would expect me to at least tell you what the first of those details is, wouldn't you? But maybe I'm feeling a bit cruel this evening. I want to keep you in suspense. So I don't want to give the game away. I actually want to build up to this detail. So for the time being, let's just call it detail number one. And let us think about the setting at this point in Scripture. Okay, so we're thinking about what is happening right now in

John chapter 20. Well, if you've got it there, the first thing that probably jumps out at you is probably maybe the time reference that John gives here. Do you not think Jesus has been, hasn't he, brutally executed? That's so ferocious, the execution, isn't it? And that's a few days prior to this. We're a few days on. But do you notice that John doesn't say, although it's Friday, he doesn't talk about this being the Sunday. Do you notice that he stresses to us that it's early on the first day of the week? I think partly to emphasize to you that, see this resurrection, it is the beginning of something entirely new. So it's not Sunday so much as the first day of the week. Now, over the years, so much time and so much energy has gone into an apparent contradiction that you have in front of you. I'm thinking if you've been in the church for any length of time, you've probably heard about this contradiction. So it just basically goes like this, that where the other gospel accounts have a group of women, don't they, going to the tomb. The apparent contradiction is, if you notice it, that John doesn't have that, that John only has Mary Magdalene going to the tomb.

I'm sure you've heard that. So is that right? Is that, now if you go online, you'll hear this all the time. There's a contradiction in the Bible. Is it a contradiction? Have a look at verse 2.

[ 5 : 27 ] Do you notice? Yes, Mary Magdalene, she goes to the tomb, she finds the tomb, the stone rolled away, she runs back to Peter and John. But what does she actually say to Peter and John? She says, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb. Look, we, we do not know where they have laid him. So you see, it's no contradiction at all. John also has a group of women going to the tomb. It's just the fact that John focuses in on Mary Magdalene. Now, are you following through the story? If you are, and you're listening really carefully to the text, maybe at this point you hear almost like a starter pistol go off, don't you? Because Peter and John, they're like, what? You know, the tomb is empty?

And so they begin to sprint towards the tomb with John, presumably, I think, because he is the younger man. He's younger than Peter. So John outstrips Peter, doesn't he? And he runs and he gets to the entrance of the tomb. Now, what does he do? He pauses. He doesn't go in, John. He pauses at the entrance of the tomb. And what he does is he surveys the scene before him. Now, this is what I reckon. Correct me if I'm wrong later. I reckon you all know this portion of Scripture really well, right? Do you? How many sermons have you heard in John chapter 20? And you've probably read it a thousand times yourself. Am I correct? Probably true, I reckon. I wonder though, have you ever noticed the repetition here? Have you ever noticed how John repeats the same detail time and time again?

Look at it again. Three times, three times, John emphasizes for you the linen cloths. Three times he draws your attention to the linen cloths. And so because that is clearly so important to this evangelist here, this author, it's not going to come as any surprise to anyone in the room, that it is here we get to the first detail that I want to linger on. This evening, first of all, I want us to think about the face cloth, the burial cloth, or the napkin, as it is sometimes translated, that was around Jesus' head. Can I ask you to do this? Can I ask you to look at verse 7 with me, please?

Peter enters the tomb. What does he see? He sees the strips of linen lying there. Now, read, as well as the burial cloth, or face cloth, or napkin that was around Jesus' head. What does he tell us about it? The Holy Spirit tells us the cloth was folded up, this face cloth, by itself, and it is separate from the linen. You're not intrigued by this? Like, over the centuries, so many people have speculated about this face cloth. But this is what I want us to do tonight. To try and think about its significance here, I want to really briefly mention an error that is really frequently made about this burial cloth. And then I just want to mention two truths that John is putting forward for us. Everyone got it? I want us to think about a mistake that's made about the burial cloth, the face cloth, and then two truths. You'll follow that, won't you? You'll be kind to your visiting minister and follow me for an error and two truths. So what's the error? Well, I want you to understand that John, with the face cloth, he is not appealing to a Jewish custom. Not appealing to a Jewish custom. We all like the internet, don't we? We all know the internet, it's Scottish uses, it's fantastic. But I think, especially through the coronavirus, we have found, if we did not realize beforehand, that the internet can be a fount of all manner of misinformation, can't it? And all manner of inaccuracy. That is definitely true here. You see, any just like superficial search online about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it'll reveal that one particular story about the face cloth is just taken off, taken off. And I don't just mean, you know, weirdos or crazy people adopting this story. I mean, good evangelical blogs and articles will tell this story. So what is it? It's the idea that what John is doing here is appealing to a Jewish custom. And it's a custom, if you'll follow this, to do with a master and his servant. So this is how the story goes. It's quite interesting. It's the idea that in the Jewish world of the first century, like a servant would make the master a meal, and then the servant would kind of slink off into the corner and just watch the master. Now, the master would come in and do one of two things, all right? There's the meal before him. Either the master would eat the meal and then throw his napkin onto the table. Now, that was a sign to the servant that he was finished with the meal.

That's the first thing. Throw the napkin, you're finished with the meal. The second thing is more interesting. Second thing is that the master would eat the meal, but then fold the napkin.

[ 11 : 09 ] That was a sign to the servant that though the master was leaving, he was going to come back to finish the meal. Has everyone got it? Through the napkin, you're finished with the meal, you fold the napkin. This was an indication that you were going, but you were coming back. Does everybody put the pieces of the jigsaw together? Like, do we see what the blogs and the articles do with this?

They see Jesus folding this napkin in the tomb, and it's though the master is signaling to the servants. Jesus the master is saying, although I am to go and ascend, this folded napkin is a sign to

the church and the disciples. One day I will come back. One day I will come back. What, friends, do you think of the story? It's nice, isn't it? It's kind of twee. It's maybe the sort of material you'd have in a kid's talk in a church. The problem with it is that it's absolute rubbish. That's the problem with it. Not only did Jews not use napkins in the first century, in addition to that, there is nothing in Scripture at all that would support such a theory. So, what can we do with it? We can put a red line through the story. But you and I surely are still scratching our heads. The Holy Spirit of God God is emphasizing before us this face cloth. Why? First of all, let me suggest this. John views this face cloth as proof of Jesus' resurrection. The face cloth folded proof of Jesus' resurrection. What do I mean? Well, I'll tell you what. Let's go back to Mary Magdalene for a second. Would you do that with me?

I wonder if you would agree with me on this, that the conclusion that Mary drew was that Jesus' body had been stolen. Isn't that right? Isn't that the conclusion that Mary drew? I mean, time and again, what does she say? She says to the angels, to Jesus, to Peter, she says, somebody's taken a body.

Somebody's removed the body. Now, you might be sitting there and you might be harsh on Mary and say, well, she should have understood that Jesus was raised. But is it not a kind of natural conclusion to draw? I hope you appreciate that grave robbery was incredibly common in the first century of the world. You get that, do you? Like the Jews, they assumed that about Jesus. A few years later, the emperor, it was Claudius, although I could be wrong about that, but he had to increase the punishments for grave robbery because it was so commonplace, so prevalent. Don't you see it?

[14:08] What is John doing? By pointing you to the face cloth, he's showing you Jesus' body wasn't taken. Jesus' body wasn't the victim of grave robbery. I mean, think about it for a second with me.

Like, you know as well as I do, surely, that linen was incredibly expensive in the ancient world. So I'm asking you, like, what self-respecting thief leaves it behind in the tomb, right?

And then you think about it as well. Wait a minute, what thief in the heat of the crime is going to spend all of his time unraveling the dead body and unraveling the head? It doesn't make any sense. Do you know what the clincher is? I think certainly for me, it's the clincher. What thief in his right mind, imagine it, taking a body out with his accomplice, what thief says to his accomplice, hang on, put the body down because I've got to go back and fold the linen. No wonder we read what we do in verse 8. John surveys the scene, but then he goes into the tomb. He looks and sees that the face cloth is folded. What happens? He knows it wasn't grave robbery. The body wasn't stolen. He sees and he believes. And then there's a second truth here about the face cloth. And I think this is perhaps even more important. And it's this, that John views the face cloth as proof of, listen to the words, Jesus' final defeat of death. See, we had, again, tonight we had two readings, didn't we? Two readings.

Maybe, again, you're wondering why on earth we read what we've read tonight. Because you know how it is in the free church or churches like ours, if you're going to have two readings, what tends to happen is tends to be Old Testament reading, New Testament reading. So maybe we're wondering why on earth did we read a few verses about Lazarus? I need you to appreciate this then, that in the way that John writes the resurrection account, Jesus' resurrection account, the way he writes this, he very, very deliberately in the grammar and in the text, he draws a parallel to the resurrection of Lazarus.

[16:42] Did you know that? He deliberately takes the reader to the raising of Lazarus. And I wonder if you've ever thought through that raising of Lazarus. I wonder if you've ever pictured how Lazarus came out of the tomb. Have you ever pictured it? Like Jesus calls in to the tomb. And do you realize that Lazarus, with greatest respect, he had to waddle out of the tomb. He had to shuffle Lazarus, almost like a penguin, like shuffling it.

Why? Because unlike our Lord, Lazarus came out of the tomb still entirely bound in the grave clothes. In fact, John does this in the text, he very deliberately specifies that unlike Jesus, that Lazarus, listen, he had his face still wrapped with the cloth as he comes out. Now, when you consider that and you think and you see how different the experience is with Jesus, do you not see the point that John is making? Please listen.

Don't you see that where Lazarus was raised still with need of his grave clothes? Our Lord could discard them as unnecessary. Don't you see that that is the point that John is making? That

Lazarus was raised still one day to die again. Jesus Christ, no. He was risen and was done with death. And do you know what my wife, in a sense, does the same thing? And I bet some people in here do the same thing.

You know, this past week or a couple of weeks ago, my wife put away our summer clothes. Obviously, a pessimist, my wife. She put away all of her summer clothes. Maybe you do this. She's putting it away. She's putting it in a, I don't know, in a suitcase and it'll maybe go in a cupboard or summer clothes up the loft, maybe, if she's truly pessimistic. But what does she do? She puts it all out, lays it all out, and she folds all of summer clothes. Why? She folds them because she doesn't need them anymore. She folds them because she's done with them. How often do we read John 20 and we look at the face cloth and we scratch our heads and ask why? Don't you see what it tells you? Jesus Christ raised. But Jesus Christ raised forevermore. The face cloth was folded. Why?

[ 19 : 23 ] Because our Savior was done with death. So we looked at the face cloth. What did I promise you at the start of the service? I promised you two details. Remember the 90% though, please. Now, this second detail, what I'm going to do here is I'm going to say two words to you. Now, you, please forgive me. The words sound disrespectful and irreverent.

They are not. And you will see that, I think. Here are the two words. Jesus is raised from the dead. So what? Now, do you see it? The reality is that there could be people, I don't know you. There could be people in here tonight who are not trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, you could ask, could you not? Well, what is the big deal here? Yes, Jesus is raised. And you could say, good for Him. Jesus is raised forevermore. Great news. But you could also say, what has that to do with me? You Christians talk about good news. Why is Jesus' resurrection good news? Well, I think there is a stunning answer to that question here. What we have to do, though, is get into the car, turn it around, and go back for two very brief unscheduled stops. So let's go back, first of all, to the text and verse 11. Please, everyone, if you've got it in front, if you look at verse 11.

So what do we see? Peter, John, see the empty tomb. They see the cloth. They go back home. Who remains at the tomb? Mary. She's still there at the tomb. And what does she do? She looks inside the tomb, maybe with tear-stained eyes, she looks in. And what does she see but two angels? Now, you see why, do you? Again, to emphasize, not grave robbery. It's a miraculous event. But I reckon, if you do it, you can imagine what happens next. Because Mary's talking to these angels, and she gets that unerring feeling you get when somebody's standing behind you. Do you know that feeling? You know, you're taking cash out of a cash machine in Union Street or something like that, and there's somebody standing behind you. Isn't it an unerring feeling? Mary gets that feeling she talks to the angel.

And Mary swings round, and there's this figure before her. And you know who it is, and I know who it is, but you notice she misidentifies this figure before her. She gets the identity of Jesus wrong. Now, you pause there. That's our first stop. For the second stop, you and I need to go all the way back to Eden and to the very first man. Now, we know our Bibles. You know your Bible, and you know an awful lot about Adam. What do you know about Adam, the first man? You know he was created in righteousness.

[ 22 : 42 ] Wasn't he created for a relationship with God? You know a lot about Adam. You know about Eve. You know, you even know Adam's job, don't you? What does Genesis say? You know, Adam is put in the garden to tend and to keep the garden. You don't even know his job. What happens with Adam? You know it, don't you?

He was faced with a tree and a test. Would he obey God? And he fails, and he plunges all of subsequent humanity into condemnation and sin. Here's the point. Why? Why does that affect me? Why? Because he was a representative of all of subsequent humanity, wasn't he? He was what we call our federal head. And you know from Genesis 3, there's this beautiful expectation that begins, because God promises one day a new figure will arise. Not like Adam, and he'll not just be a king and a ruler and a leader. One day a new representative of his people shall arise. One the New Testament sees as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, right? Isn't that it? Jesus Christ faced with a tree and a test. Would he obey? In fact, in the previous chapter, Pilate says of Jesus the exact words that God said of Adam in the garden.

Pilate says of Jesus, behold the man. And if you follow all of that, do you not see the tension that is in the air as Mary turns around to Jesus? I mean, can you imagine the tension if you were reading this for the first time? Do you not see the question that is on the reader's lips? We're all asking, wait

a minute, will God accept the work of this new figurehead? Has Jesus Christ in his life and in his death, has he represented his people properly? And I ask you, what happens? What mistake does Mary make as she swivels round? We are desperately in need of a new Adam, desperately in need of a new representative? And at the most critical point in all of human history, our Lord allows himself to be misidentified as a gardener. Do you see? Surely we see the theological implications of that.

Do you see it? Here before Mary on this glorious resurrection morning was the second Adam. Here in that morning light, the last Adam, the greater gardener than Adam. Here before Mary was the representative of his people that was truly, properly, eternally accepted by God. And that is wonderful, isn't it?

What is even more remarkable is considering what it means. Because what is that question? What were those two words? Jesus is risen, so what? But don't you see it now? If he is our representative, don't you see what it means? It means he is risen for you, Christian friend. He is risen for us. It means you have no fear of death, no need to fear death, because Christ Jesus has been raised and we are raised in him.

[ 26 : 21 ] He raised us the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead. And so I'll end this Lord's Day with a question for every single one of us in here. You understand, do you, that Jesus Christ is the gardener of his church? Do you see that? Isaiah 58 says, God says to his people, you shall be as a watered garden. Christ promises us in death you will be with him in paradise in the garden. Revelation speaks of, describes the church as a garden watered by the rivers of life. Here's the question for you.

Tonight, as I speak to you this evening, here, does Christ Jesus tend your soul? Has the grace of God in your life brought forth the flowers, the plants of repentance from your sin and faith? In short, the question I ask you, tonight, are you trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins? You must understand all of humanity stand behind only one of two representatives. You stand either with Adam in his rejection, rebellion against God, or tonight you stand in Christ Jesus.

Which is it? Which is it for you? I pray, genuinely I pray, that if tonight she came through the doors, not trusting in Christ, I pray that the Holy Spirit has awoken you to the wonders of the Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that tonight. What happened for John in that tomb, I pray that it would happen for you. I pray that you would see the folded grave clothes, that you would see the greater gardener than Adam, that you would see the greater gardener than Adam, and that you would see and believe. Friends, let's bow our heads and let's pray.

Gracious God Almighty, we bow before you and we thank you that the grave clothes were folded. We thank you that this speaks of the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 28 : 48 ] We thank you that you have indeed provided the representative that we need, that if we look to Christ in repentance and faith, we are saved, saved.

That death, even death, has lost its sting. Lord God, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.