

Napkins and Why Words Matter

"Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself." (Jno. 20:6-7, ESV)

A friend forwarded the following in e-mail, "Why did Jesus fold the linen burial cloth after His resurrection? 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..."

This napkin tradition story makes for a fun read, but is it true? Is there such a tradition? Even if there is, how can we be certain the word translated as "napkin" (KJV) or "face cloth" (ESV) in Jno. 20:7 (cf. Jno. 11:44; Luk. 19:20; Ac. 19:12) has anything to do with a napkin for eating? This is a curious comparison, but the writer implies this is "the" significance of the napkin being found folded. Words were carefully used by the writers of scripture: Let us be equally careful in understanding and interpreting them. Not every drop of water in scripture prefigures baptism, not every ounce of wood the cross of Christ. Not every napkin is a face cloth. If we represent something as true, let scripture actually teach it as true. It is not enough that we want or desire it to be true: It must actually be true.