

What did John ‘see and believe’ in the tomb? Countless Easter sermons and many Bible commentators may have got it wrong

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This article examines the varying interpretations of John 20:6–9. There is a 1,600-year division of opinion on the subject, with eminent figures in church history on opposing sides of the issue. Simply put, the two interpretations are (1) the mundane, that the evangelist believed what the women had said (the body was removed); or (2) the miraculous, that he believed Christ had risen from the dead. In the last two centuries, opinion has shifted significantly away from the mundane interpretation, due in part to a misunderstanding or mistranslation of the terms used for burial cloths. The author argues that the mundane is more consistent with the wording, the style of the gospel, and the relevant passages in Luke.

KEYWORDS

Easter, empty tomb, resurrection, burial cloths, johannine witness

This article was inspired by a rather heated internet discussion over John 20:6–9, particularly the arrangement of gravecloths and the possible role of the Turin Shroud. A respected professor of history and avid Shroud researcher stated: ‘The clearest line in this entire discussion is that the disciple believed in the Resurrection because of what he saw in the tomb.’

⁶Then Simon Peter came following him, went into the tomb, and saw the grave cloth [or cloths, *othonia*] lying ⁷ and the headband [*soudarion*] which was upon His head lying not with the grave cloth but rolled up apart in one place. ⁸Then the other disciple who had come first to the tomb went in, and he saw and believed. ⁹For they did not yet know [or understand] the scripture that He must rise from the dead.

My own view also had always been that what John saw inside the tomb caused him to believe that Christ had risen from the dead, but on re-reading the passage I was reminded how odd the next sentence (v. 9) was in the context. Taking that verse as the primary focus of interpretation, John’s empty tomb narrative took on a totally different and more reasonable sense. Suddenly it seemed very clear that John’s conclusion was simply that some people had

taken the body: he ‘believed’ what Mary had told him, namely that ‘They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we know not where they have put him’ (v. 2). If one assumes that the word ‘her’ was understood after ‘he saw and believed’, the whole text makes sense.

If on the other hand, the intended meaning is that he believed Jesus had come back from the dead, the next line seems contradictory. Bible exegetes and translators have struggled with this apparent conflict. Most explain it as did MacGregor (1928): the disciple concluded resurrection ‘only as a result of [his] own eyes ... since they did not yet realize what the Scriptures predicted’. Some have twisted the translation to force agreement, e.g. ‘Until this time’ [*Worldwide English New Testament*] or ‘For until then’ [*The Living Bible*] they did not understand the Scripture. But that is clearly a distortion, and the verse taken at its face value seems very much like a parenthetical admission of not realizing what had actually happened.

This interpretation puts the initial events of Easter morning in a different light. Were the disciples racing to the tomb in anticipation of Christ’s resurrection, as Sunday school lessons and Easter sermons invariably teach? Was this possibility even remotely present in their minds? Verse 9 states clearly that it was not. The

dramatic foot race must then have been motivated by the mystery of the reported missing body, removed by unknown people with unclear motives. 'They' could be grave robbers; the hundredweight of spices would have been valuable and perhaps the body could be held for ransom. Or was it removed by the Roman or Jewish authorities, or even by Joseph and Nicodemus who had arranged Jesus' burial? Was the body of Jesus to be further defiled, or perhaps to be given an even grander burial place?

Curious to know how biblical scholars dealt with the seeming contradiction between verses 8 and 9, I began a review of what had been written on the subject. Most modern scholars who accept the Johannine Gospel as a first-hand account (rather than a legend or a 'theologizing' narrative) interpret the passage to mean that what the author saw led him to believe in the Resurrection. Many shared the view of New Testament scholar Peter Walker (1999):

Jesus' grave clothes were still there – in position, as it were ... For John at least, this was evidence enough. No robber would have carefully wrapped up the head cloth in this way, and no one would have dragged a naked corpse out into the open. The only way to explain what he was now seeing was that Jesus' body ... in some miraculous way had passed through the grave clothes.

Similar views are to be found in pre-modern biblical scholarship, e.g. McGarvey and Pendleton (1914): 'John saw and became the first believer in the Resurrection'; John Darby (1857–67): 'The two disciples ... see, and, on these visible proofs, they believe ... He had risen.' The Catholic catechism also offers this view, one that does seem to be supported by the importance John apparently attaches to the details of the grave cloths. Robinson (1978) however held that the Greek text does not provide evidence of any order to the grave cloths, there was no obvious meaning to be seen in them, and: 'It was only the faith of one man [John] that put two and two together.'

However, it was reassuring to find that I was not alone in coming to a different conclusion about the passage. The theologian Richard Swinburne (2003) and the early Bible commentator John Gill (1746–48) had similar mundane interpretations. Gill, on the words 'and believed' commented: '... that the body was not there, but either was taken away, or was raised from the dead; but whether as yet he believed

the latter is doubtful, by what follows [in the next verse]'. Swinburne, in a sub-chapter entitled 'The Unexpectedness of the Resurrection' wrote: 'John also comments that, when the disciples saw the empty tomb, "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead".'

Some commentators offer a rather fanciful interpretation. Turner and Mantey (c. 1965) wonder about the *soudarion* napkin that was rolled up in a place by itself: 'Could it be that John had witnessed Jesus roll a handkerchief like this again and again after he finished eating a meal?' Others make a forensic judgement: 'No pilferer would have left the shrouds in this condition' (Davidson (ed.) 1953). Most opt for the supernatural, as did Henry Latham in his widely read *The Risen Master* (1901): the body had passed through the grave cloths and left them intact as a clear sign to the disciples. The *Catholic Commentary on the Bible* (1951) manages to turn verse 9 into a positive: 'John perceived the truth at once and with the light of faith saw the meaning of some scriptural prophecy ...' Ellicott (1860) concurred: '... from that moment they recognized ... that He must rise again'. The renowned nineteenth-century Bible scholar Godet (1886) was firmly of the view that John saw and believed immediately that Christ had risen, but offered a curious view of verses 8 and 9:

we must not find here an eulogy which John would bestow on himself and which would resemble a boast. The following verse shows the spirit of humility which prevails in this narrative ... Even [he and Peter] did not grasp the meaning of the prophecies.

Many of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentaries contain references to the body having been wrapped like a mummy. In spite of modern research on the various Greek terms for grave cloths that clearly indicates otherwise, one still finds this idea in some present-day Bible guides, e.g. 'they wrapped the body in strips of linen and prepared it like a mummy' (McGee c. 1975). This made me wonder if this image from the last few centuries of Egyptology had perhaps influenced the interpretation, leading people to assume that the body must have passed through the bindings in some miraculous manner, leaving them inexplicably in place. One of the most direct statements of this line of thought came from Rt Rev. Charles C. Grafton writing c. 1890 (Rogers 1914):

The interesting question that arises here is, what did he see that made him believe? The answer is to be found in the Eastern manner in which the body was wrapped and bandaged for interment. A hundred pounds of spices had been used and the body then tightly wound in linen, made fast by long strips which were wound under and over the body and crossed behind and before. The head was treated after the anointing in the same way and the headgear resembled a sort of covering or helmet. Now what was it S. John saw? He saw the linen clothes ... there was only one deduction to be drawn. No body could have been taken out of those clothes, with the bandages lying as they were, nor could any one have got out of them without disturbing them. When Christ rose, He passed through them ...

Going to earlier commentators, I found opinion on what John believed much less certain. Matthew Poole (1685) wrote that he 'believeth that Christ was risen from the dead, or (as some think) that as the women had said, somebody had taken him away'. Then, a major surprise – John Wesley (1755) flatly rejected the former notion:

'He saw': That the body was not there, and 'believed' – That they had taken it away as Mary said.

'For as yet': They had no thought of his rising again.

Erasmus and Luther had similar views on the passage (Lange 1862). John Calvin (c. 1550) however was a strong proponent of the opposite view, but significantly, he based his interpretation on the word 'believe':

'And he saw and believed.' It is a poor exposition which some give of these words, that John believed what he had heard Mary say, namely, that Christ's body had been carried away; for there is no passage in which the word 'believe' bears this meaning, especially when it is used simply and without any addition. Nor is this inconsistent with the fact, that Peter and John return home, while they are still in doubt and perplexity; for in some passages John had employed this phraseology, when he intended to describe the increase of faith.

Several modern exegetes also emphasize the use of word 'believe' *pisteuo* by John as necessarily involving faith, but a passage from the Crucifixion narrative (John 19:35) regarding the flow of blood

and water after the piercing could be interpreted as 'so that you will believe [my account]'.

Attempting to find even earlier interpretations, I made a hard slog through hundreds of Google hits on various search terms and it paid off finally in a major and unexpected surprise. These words were written in about AD 416:

'And he saw, and believed.' Here some, by not giving due attention, suppose that John believed that Jesus had risen again; but there is no indication of this from the words that follow. For what does he mean by immediately adding, 'For as yet they knew not the scripture, that He must rise again from the dead'? He could not then have believed that He had risen again, when he did not know that it behoved Him to rise again. What then did he see? What was it that he believed? What but this, that he saw the sepulchre empty, and believed what the woman had said, that He had been taken away from the tomb?

This passage comes from *The Homilies [or Tractates] on the Gospel of John (In Joannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV)* by St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. As if to stress the point, he opens the next homily by repeating it:

Mary Magdalene had brought the news to His disciples, Peter and John, that the Lord was taken away from the sepulchre; and they, when they came thither, found only the linen clothes wherewith the body had been shrouded; and what else could they believe but what she had told them, and what she had herself also believed?

I felt a sense of elation at finding these words of the great doctor of the Church, not only for his immense authority but also for the early date. This suggested to me that there could not possibly have been anything miraculous or cryptic implied in John's simple remark, if someone who lived so close to the early church could reject the deeper interpretation so firmly. And although Augustine noted there were 'some' at that time who held an opposing view, he deemed it to have no validity. It certainly did not appear to constitute an independent tradition, but rather an error of textual interpretation that some had fallen into.

My elation was short-lived, however, when further searches revealed that another important figure of the early Church also wrote a series of *Homilies on the Gospel of St John*, and offered the opposite view (perhaps the one slated by Augustine for 'not giving

due attention'). John Chrysostom, also a saint and a doctor of the Church, wrote the following c. AD 390 in Antioch:

... [seeing] the linen clothes lying, which was a sign of the Resurrection. For neither, if any persons had removed the body, would they before doing so have stripped it; nor if any had stolen it, would they have taken the trouble to remove the napkin, and roll it up, and lay it in a place by itself; but how? They would have taken the body as it was. On this account John tells us by anticipation that it was buried with much myrrh, which glues linen to the body not less firmly than lead; in order that when you hear that the napkins lay apart, you may not endure those who say that He was stolen. For a thief would not have been so foolish as to spend so much trouble on a superfluous matter. For why should he undo the clothes? ... But why do the clothes lie apart, while the napkin was wrapped together by itself? That you may learn that it was not the action of men in confusion or haste, the placing some in one place, some in another, and the wrapping them together. From this they believed in the Resurrection.

Clearly he is making use of some personal or local knowledge of how (in that climate perhaps?) myrrh 'glues linen to the body'. This could have an implication for studies of the Turin Shroud, but we have no evidence that the phenomenon of myrrh acting in this manner was ever seen in first-century Palestine burials.

It is difficult to decide which of these two eminent early Christian thinkers, or indeed which of the two lines of interpretation, is the correct reading. My inclination would be to doubt the speculations of John Chrysostom and to follow Augustine, who would certainly have been attuned to a hint of the miraculous or the mystical in the Johannine Gospel.

In the end, without new archaeological or manuscript evidence, this matter will not be settled. The passage has been interpreted in two diametrically opposed ways by learned biblical exegetes and theologians ever since the fourth century. The meaning of 'he saw and believed' will ultimately rest with each individual, and like many other passages from the Bible, different interpretations can be built from different perspectives and by emphasizing different words or texts.

In my view, understanding what John is saying in this passage must be based on his style throughout the gospel. He did not speak in riddles or hide his

meaning in cryptic remarks, with the sole exception of the possible self-identifying phrase 'the disciple that Jesus loved'. Rather, he revelled in the wonders and miracles that he experienced. If John really believed that Christ's body had risen through the linen cloths, or as some have suggested, if he saw Christ's image on the linen as per the Turin Shroud, surely he would have proclaimed this in the same manner that he wrote of the other marvels done by the Son of God.

Furthermore, the actions of the two apostles also seem more in line with a simple 'he believed [her]'. What did John and Peter do next: rejoice and praise the Lord? Recall triumphantly what Jesus had foretold? Tell Mary to grieve no more? Race back to tell the others? No, they 'went back home' (John 20:10) and left Mary weeping at the tomb (v. 11). Hardly what one would expect if John believed that this most stupendous of miracles had just happened. Latham asks with some logic why the disciples did not set out to find the body if they merely believed it to have been removed. But one might equally wonder why they did not start searching for the Lord if they believed him to have come back from the dead, grievously wounded not to mention being alone, without food, clothes or shelter.

The account in Luke would seem to support the mundane interpretation: when the women reported finding the body missing and seeing angels at the tomb, 'it seemed like an idle tale' [to the men] and they did not believe [*apisteuo*] it [or them]' (24:11). Then 'certain of them which were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said' (v. 24). In other words, some of the male disciples saw the empty tomb themselves and only then did they believe that the body was missing. Subsequently, the two followers who left for Emmaus were described as walking along the road recalling the events of the morning with sadness (v. 17). Are we to suppose from all of this that John said nothing to Peter or the others about the evidence of the grave cloths and his belief that Christ had risen? From what we see of his personality in the gospel, it does not seem likely.

The authorship and historical accuracy of the Gospel of John is subject to intense debate. Some maintain that it is primarily a theologizing account and should not be taken as literal history. But the passage we have considered here is replete with minor details, a characteristic usually taken as evidence of a real account of events according to someone's

memory. Unfortunately this simple account of the empty tomb leaves us wondering just exactly what the author really believed at that crucial moment.

The passage illustrates in microcosm what one of the notable commentators, Leon Morris, is cited as having remarked on this gospel – it is ‘a pool in which a child [lay reader] may wade and an elephant [theologian, historian, exegete] drown!’

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Coming Next Month

In next month's edition, Sara Parvis explores the life and work of Perpetua; D. Moody Smith asks 'The Epistles of John: What's New Since Brooke's ICC in 1912?', and Caroline Blyth offers an article on Genesis ch. 34: "Listen to My Voice": Challenging Dinah's Silence'. The Book of the Month is the third volume of Roger Haight's *Ecclesial Existence: Christian Community in History*, reviewed by John Riches.