

Why Was the Napkin by Itself?



One of the most curious aspects of the Resurrection story is that John records the incident of the folded napkin (face cloth) wrapped or folded by itself away from the other grave clothes. We must ask ourselves what was the significance of that fact? Was it significant? Was there a message in John pointing this out?

We believe that everything in Scripture is there for a reason. John intended to highlight this just as he humorously pointed out that he did outrun Peter getting to the tomb. There have been varying attempts to explain this tantalizing tidbit. We will include two or three attempted explanations of this as well as links to opposing views.

Finally, I will add my carefully thought out alternative opinion of its significance based on the Last Supper events. There was an event in the Jewish Seder that provides an insight to what John saw and understood. It involves the Seder Haggadah, and the *Afikoman*, the Matzah cracker broken and hidden away until the end of the Seder when it is brought back out.

The Servant/Master Story of the Napkin

Why did Jesus fold the linen burial cloth after His resurrection? I never noticed 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. Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, 'They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and I don't know where they have put him!' Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb to see.

The other disciple out ran Peter and got there first. He stopped and looked in and saw the linen cloth lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying to the side.

Was that important? 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 were 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 finished.."

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 folded napkin meant, "I'm coming back!"

The Carpenter Story of the Napkin

This Internet forward offers another “spin” on the folded napkin story. It also is an amusing, but untrue and unbiblical, story.

During Jesus’ time there was one way a carpenter let the contractor know a job was finished. A signature, so to speak.

Imagine a hot afternoon in Galilee. Jesus has completed the final pieces of a job he has worked on for several days. The hair of his strong forearms is matted with sawdust and sweat. His face is shiny with heat. He takes a final-and welcome-drink of cool water from a leather bag.

Then, standing to the side of his work, he pours water over his face and chest, splashing it over his arms to clean himself before his journey home. With a nearby towel, he pats his face and arms dry.

Finally, Jesus folds the towel neatly in half, and then folds it in half again. He sets it on the finished work and walks away. Later, whoever arrives to inspect the work will see the towel and understand its simple message. The work is finished.

Christ’s disciples, of course, knew this carpenter’s tradition. On a Sunday of sorrow, three years after Jesus had set aside his carpenter tools, Peter will crouch to look into an empty tomb and see only the linens that the risen Lord has left behind.

A smile will cross Peter’s face as his sorrow is replaced by hope, for he will see the wrap that had covered Jesus’ face. It has been folded in half, then folded in half again and left neatly on the floor of the tomb.

Peter understands. The carpenter has left behind a simple message. It is finished.

Debunking the Napkin Folded by Itself

The Greek word, *soudarion*, translated “napkin” in the KJV, is translated as handkerchief in the NKJV, and face/grave cloth in ESV, NASB, and others. The Greek word is defined in the Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible as:

soudarion, soo-dar’-ee-on; of Lat. or.; a *sudarium* (sweat-cloth), i.e. towel (for wiping the perspiration from the face, or binding the face of a corpse):-handkerchief, napkin.

The word *soudarion* used in John 20:7 is clearly meant to be understood as a burial cloth. There is nothing to imply that this was a table napkin. The only way to get the word “napkin” from the text is to utilize the King James translation of the word *soudarion* and it must be understood that in 1611 England the word napkin did not refer to a table napkin. It referred to a piece of cloth for wrapping. Even in the UK today, a nappy (shortened form of napkin) refers to a folded cloth diaper for a baby, not a table napkin.

A cloth table napkin is called a serviette in England. So the KJV’s 1611 word “napkin” means a cloth or towel.

Additionally, the word *soudarion* appears three other times, none of which indicates table use:

1. When Jesus resurrected Lazarus, he came forth from the tomb with his face wrapped with a *soudarion* (KJV, napkin: John 11:44)
2. The slave whose master gave him a pound hid it wrapped in a *soudarion* (KJV, napkin: Luke 19:20)
3. Paul’s handkerchiefs (*soudarion*) that were brought to the sick and had power to heal and exorcise demons (Acts 19:12).

Why The Folded Napkin?

A simple and literal reading of biblical texts tell us that the napkin/face cloth was wrapped around the head of Jesus when His body was prepared for burial by Joseph and Nicodemus (John 19:38-40). Jesus' body was then laid in the tomb (John 19:41-42) and, when the disciples saw the grave cloths, the napkin/face cloth was found "wrapped (*entulisso*) together in a place by itself" (John 20:7)— meaning, it was found where it was last placed in the tomb, the place where Jesus' head lay. It remained there "wrapped together" but empty, "in a place by itself"— meaning, separate from the cloth that wrapped the body.

The word wrapped tells us that the napkin was never unwrapped and removed from Jesus' head. Jesus' body was raised from the tomb by the Holy Spirit and the grave clothes simply remained where his body had been laid, intact, still wrapped as they had been around His body.

If Jesus had removed the napkin (face cloth) and then folded it, the same Greek word used in Hebrews 1:12 (*helisso*) would have been used in the gospel account instead of *entulisso* (wrapped). The story that claims Jesus rose from the dead and folded the face cloth, to leave a message telling that He would return, is simply fabricated (pun intended). It is not biblically supported.

It appears that whoever wrote this story used several different translations to contrive a folded napkin. If that is not enough to discredit this urban legend that circulates around the Internet, this should wrap it up (pun intended).

Historical Support Missing

The people in Israel at the time of Christ did not use table napkins. They used their hands to eat and they would use a piece of bread to wipe their greasy fingers and their mouth. They would then drop the piece of bread on the floor for the dogs to consume (see Mark 7:28). Greek writings and plays also offer historical evidence that bread was used to wipe the hands and mouth after eating. Table napkins originated in ancient Rome and the earliest English references for the use of table napkins as a European practice are found around [1385-1385](#) AD.

An Alternative to Those Two Fictitious Stories

The Afikoman Hidden Away

There is a very strange custom as part of the Passover Seder every Jew has practiced for thousands of years that they fail to be able to explain. It is the *Afikoman*, a matzah cracker taken from the middle of three matzahs, broken in half, wrapped in a cloth and hidden away at the beginning of the meal.

The word *Afikoman* is not Hebrew. It is Greek but its meaning is not literally known. For Jews it means “that which comes after” or dessert. But it is not dessert at all. Messianic Jews say it means “He came, or I came” based on Psalm 40:7-10, “*Behold I have come in the volume of the book it is written of me, to do thy will O my God...*” Whatever its meaning the fact that it is broken and hidden away until after the meal is over seems significant.

According to Jewish tradition It would have been the youngest member of the family, who sat next to the father during the Passover Seder, who was designated to hid the *Afikoman*. That would have been the disciple John, who was the youngest of the disciples and who did sit on Jesus’ right.

It would have been a significant revelation to young John to arrive at the tomb first and see the facecloth/napkin wrapped/folded together in a place by itself. He would have remembered hiding the mystery of the *Afikoman* and the unwrapping of it at the end of supper and wondering what it meant. Now he knew. It was Jesus, dead, buried and hidden away three days, until his revelation in the resurrection.

We may never know until we get to heaven the true significance of Jesus folding the face napkin apart from the grave clothes. But one can only speculate that John thought it significant enough to make note of it many years later in his retelling of the resurrection story.