

# The Shroud

John 20:1-18; Isaiah 25:6-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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There is a story of a preacher in Jackson, Mississippi. He stood up on Easter Sunday, leaned into the mic and said, “It’s all true,” then sat down.

I suspect that there are preachers on this day who are tempted to choose this option.

(I suspect there may be even more congregations who would be delighted if their preachers gave in to this particular temptation! 😊)

Most preachers feel like of *all* the days in the Christian year, this is the one that deserves the very best words, the very best theology, the very best rhetoric.

And yet, what does one say? What can we say that hasn’t been said before? Or that avoids either the twin errors of reducing the resurrection to a harmless metaphor for springtime newness or smothering it with explanations and interpretations?

What words are up to the task of proclaiming this most joyful and holiest of mysteries, this central reality upon which the Christian faith is based, and without which it would not exist?

“It’s all true” seems somehow to sum it up. Or, perhaps the words of Mary, as she is shot like a rocket from the shock of an empty tomb: “I have seen the Lord!”

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Well, having got your hopes up for a one sentence sermon, I will now dash them with a few more words. 😊

Each year as I make my way through the texts of Holy Week, whether it’s the Passion narrative we went through on Maundy Thursday or the texts for today, Resurrection

Sunday, I am struck by something new. Or the old words somehow speak to me in a different way. Something different almost always stands out.

This year, it wasn't the resurrection story from John's gospel. It was a line from the prophet Isaiah, written at least eight centuries before Mary discovered the tomb to be empty:

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25:7).

One word stood out to me. You can probably guess what that word is based on my sermon title.

Shroud.

A shroud, as you likely know, was simply a length of cloth or an enveloping garment in which a dead person was (and still is, in many parts of the world) wrapped for burial.

All four of the gospel writers describe Joseph of Arimathea wrapping the dead body of Jesus in strips of linen cloth.

Most obviously, a shroud covers or protects a body.

It also hides the disfigurements of suffering and death from view. In John 19:37, as the soldiers are cleaning up "the mess" of Calvary, John quotes the prophet Zechariah saying, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Then and now, we find this hard to do. We hide death — whether the death of the Son of God or all our deaths — from view. We shroud death, to move from "shroud" as a noun to a verb.

Which brings us to a second, more metaphorical way in which we use the word "shroud."

Shroud can also mean "a thing that envelops or obscures something." We use the word this way in everyday language.

"The whole affair was shrouded in secrecy."

“There was a shroud of fog that hovered over the landscape this morning.” This was literally the case as I drove in to church this morning.

This metaphorical sense of the word is what Isaiah has in mind when he says,

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Isaiah describes death itself as a shroud.

Death is portrayed not as the thing that we are trying to hide, but as the thing that hides or obscures or envelops.

Death conceals something deeper and truer from view.

On my drive in this morning, I was struck by how this is literally true with the fog. The landscape was hidden to me. Things that I knew were there — houses, trees, machinery, barns — I couldn't see.

For Isaiah, death is a fog, something that hovers, something that obscures, preventing us from seeing clearly, from looking at reality accurately or truly.

Now, there is, in one sense, nothing more natural than death. Everyone dies. Everything dies.

Death is a biological fact. It is even a necessity for the generation of new life (think of forest fires, for example).

And yet, we are thinking existentially not biologically. We, alone, of all God's creatures cannot reconcile ourselves with the biological fact of the matter. We, alone, seem to have eternity set in our hearts. We alone long for something more than what we see.

What does Isaiah mean when he speaks of death as a “shroud?” Well, a few things came to mind.

**Death shrouds our vision cosmically.** We hear many people speak of a world hurtling toward ultimate nothingness. Others warn of a fiery combination of fire and judgment at

the end of days. The merchants of dread come in different flavours. But their common message is that our planet and our existence is threatened. We must never feel secure.

**Death shrouds our vision geopolitically.** We see so much war and conflict and suffering and destruction and we know that this has always been the way of the world. We wonder, “How could there ever be peace?” We fear that however stable things might look or feel for us at any given moment, conflict is baked into the system and peace is fragile at best.

**Death shrouds our vision in the church.** Maybe particularly in the West where we hear of steady declines, of churches closing their doors or fizzling out in uninspiring conflict. We know that Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against his church, but sometimes we wonder.

**Death shrouds our vision in the realm of our relationships.** We see people we love getting divorced or being estranged from their kids or sabotaging friendships or burning bridges everywhere they go. We watch relationships break down all around us. We know that we were created for community and connection, that God did not create us to be isolated units. But it is so hard sometimes. We wonder if or when death — literal or metaphorical — will steal from us the people that matter most.

**Death shrouds our vision personally and existentially.** Over time, we feel our bodies begin to betray us. We start attending more funerals. We, of all creatures on this earth, live knowing that we will die.

**And, of course, running through all of these things, we must say that death shrouds our vision of God.** Our fear and anxiety over death prevents us from seeing God truly, from trusting God fully. We are suspicious of God. We see him as a threat rather than a loving Father. We struggle to believe that God is, indeed, love.

Death shrouds, envelops all of life, concealing the deepest, truest things about this world, about us, about what we’re made for, and about where this whole story is going.

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Until Jesus bursts forth from the tomb on Easter morning.

I want to take us back to the reading from John’s gospel that began our service today:

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself (John 20:3-7).

Isaiah promised of a day when God would destroy the shroud that is cast over all people.

And here, we see the literal shroud that was used to wrap up the body of God-in-human-flesh, executed by sinful humanity, neatly folded up in an empty tomb.

Isaiah spoke of a day when God would “wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people.”

And here we see Jesus asking Mary, “Why are you weeping?” (John 20:15).

Things have never been the same since the shock of that first Easter. A great reversal has begun.

Now, we might say that it is the life of God that shrouds this world with all its death and dying. Life wraps up and envelops death.

It changes our vision. It opens our hearts and our minds to how things really are, rather than leaving us to the smallness and the sadness of how things might seem at any given moment.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is so many things. No sermon could possibly even gesture toward all that it means to us and for us.

But among other things, it is the hammer blow in God's destruction of death.

Because the tomb was empty, because it could not contain the crucified Lord, we now see things more clearly. Not fully. We still await God's salvation in its fullness.

But Easter is the new beginning that has been made. Easter is God's unfolding removal of the shroud that reduces our vision, that keeps us in fear and uncertainty, grasping to control what we cannot.

I know that even on Easter Sunday, we bring a range of experiences to worship.

Some may be full of joy on this Easter Sunday. Your vision is clear, your hope is strong, and your faith is full. If this is true for you, praise God.

I know that some others may feel that their experience remains shrouded by death. Perhaps it is personal circumstances. Perhaps it is sorrow at the state of the world. Perhaps it is a list of failures that you feel is getting a bit too long.

If so, I hope that you can hear Jesus calling to you by name, like Mary. *Lift up your gaze. Do not despair.* To borrow the words of Francis Spufford, *far more can be mended than you know.*

More likely, most of us find ourselves somewhere between these two poles of experience. I hope that for each one of us this Easter Sunday can be a day where the gospel of life can illuminate and burn through the fog, helping us to see God and ourselves and this world truly.

Our passage from Isaiah ends with these words:

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

“It will be said on that day...”

That day is this day. Easter Sunday.

The day when the church joyfully proclaims, “This is the Lord for whom we have waited. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Thanks — and praise and honour and glory — be to God.

Amen.

