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Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
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Easter Sunday – Year C  
Acts 10.34-43  
Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24  
1 Corinthians 15.19-26  
John 20.1-18

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's in the handkerchief! The proof of Jesus' resurrection is in the handkerchief! I don't know about you, but I never knew a handkerchief could be so important. Perhaps in my childhood there was some wisdom in my mother always asking me before I left home whether I had a clean handkerchief. Little did I know that all I had to do was reach in my pocket and be assured of Jesus' resurrection.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but let me explain. Aren't we always looking for proof of Jesus' resurrection? Believers and skeptics alike want to know what happened to Jesus' body on that first Easter Day. For many the empty tomb is insufficient proof. For many an empty tomb is proof of merely an empty tomb – and that leaves us feeling empty. We want to believe. We want to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but how do we acquire such faith?

Mary Magdalene wanted to believe that Jesus rose from the dead that first Easter Day. She saw that the stone had been removed from in front of Jesus' tomb. That should have been the first clue for her, and for us, that something more than human was involved here. But she jumped to conclusions: the authorities must have taken Jesus' body, grave robbers must have taken the body, something must have happened. So she runs to two of the disciples and exclaims, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb [whoever 'they' are], and we [don't] know where they have laid him."

So the two disciples run toward the tomb and one of them bends down, looks into the tomb, and sees the burial linens in which Jesus had been wrapped lying there. The other disciple, Peter, goes into the tomb and not only sees the burial linens but also the cloth that had been on Jesus' head – a handkerchief, if you will, used to wipe perspiration from one's face and customarily used in Jewish burial practices of the time to cover the face of the deceased. But the handkerchief wasn't lying with the other burial linens. It was rolled up neatly over in a corner of the tomb. The first disciple then enters the tomb, sees the other burial linens lying there, sees the handkerchief neatly rolled up in the corner, and believes – for until then they did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.

Why didn't the disciples understand the scripture? How many times did Jesus tell them how he must suffer, be rejected by the authorities, and be killed, and on the third day be raised? They were with him all that time, and they didn't get it. And why don't we understand the scripture? Well, we don't put in enough time trying to understand. We don't put in enough time reading the scripture. We persist in doubting.

Even though Jesus has given us reason not to doubt anymore, we persist in doubting. We ignore the stone to the tomb having been rolled away, although the stone was too large to be moved by human force. We find an empty tomb inconclusive. Some say that the authorities quickly removed Jesus' body, but then they certainly wouldn't have taken to time to unwrap the body and leave the linens behind. Some say that grave robbers stole the body, but again they would not have left the expensive linens behind, and they certainly would not have neatly rolled up the face linen – the

handkerchief – and placed it carefully aside in the tomb. So why are these linens in the empty tomb?

You may remember that when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus came out from the tomb remaining bound in his burial wrappings, including the burial cloth over his face, and he needed help from others to become free. Lazarus’ “resurrection” was temporary, and the authorities’ murderous plot against him must have come to fruition because we have not heard of Lazarus living forever. Jesus, in contrast, has left his burial wrappings behind because he has no need of them, for Jesus lives forever. Jesus has conquered death for all time. And in contrast to Moses, who needed a veil covering his face to speak to God on Mount Sinai, Jesus needs no veil as he returns to God because he and the Father are one.

More importantly, the careful rolling up of the burial handkerchief adds another facet to our believing: Jesus’ body was not simply swept up in a passive act of resurrection that would leave the handkerchief lying there like the other linens. Rather, Jesus actively participated in his resurrection. If the lying there of the burial linens represents the act of the Father in releasing Jesus from death, then the rolled-up handkerchief tells us that, having been invited to take up his life again, Jesus did so in fulfillment of his earlier statement: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10.17-18) This should come as no surprise because we have heard “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God;” and

from the beginning God and Jesus as the Word of God have cooperated in bringing life and light to the world.<sup>1</sup>

But our belief, our faith, depends on more than a handkerchief. That's why we have to work on our faith. That's why we have to increase our faith. That's why we read scripture. That's why we engage with scripture. That's how we engage our faith. That's why we come to church – to be sustained in our faith by a community of fellow journeyers.

Faith has been defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11.1) While we weren't there that first Easter Day – to see the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, the burial linens lying on the ground, and the handkerchief rolled neatly in the corner – by engaging the story of Jesus' resurrection we can have faith. We can have assurance of the things for which we hope. Our hope as followers of Jesus is that by his resurrection we can live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, as we await Jesus' coming again in glory and the completion of God's purpose for the world. And our assurance as followers of Jesus is that by his resurrection nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God!

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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<sup>1</sup> The line of analysis comes from Wes Howard-Brook, Becoming Children of God, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 444-45.