

The Sepulchral Mystery Tour

John 20:1-10 Easter 2026

It was just past midnight in Bavaria, Germany. Lisa's doorbell rang. She assumed it was just someone playing ding-dong-ditch. But then her sister-in-law, who lived in the apartment above, called. *Her* doorbell had been ringing over and over. While they were on the phone, Lisa's bell rang again.

Here's where the mystery gets interesting: No person was setting off either their cameras or their motion-detecting lights.

It was then that Lisa called the police. They searched the premises, but found nothing. It was like a classic Agatha Christie or Sherlock Holmes scene: An eerie set of circumstances that *seemed* impossible, yet clearly *something* had come knocking on multiple doors.

Lisa's husband finally solved the case when he found an important clue. Looking carefully at the doorbell, he saw a little trail of slimy residue. Follow the trail and you'd find the culprit sitting right there in plain view: A slug on the nameplate.¹

Most of us love a good mystery. That's why Agatha Christie *still* sells 5 million copies a year,² why *Clue* is the second best-selling board game franchise,³ and why you can pay \$1,000 per person to be the detective at a murder mystery weekend getaway.⁴

The first Easter Sunday was a heart-pounding mystery. Only, instead of being surprised by a body, they were surprised to *not* find a body. Jesus' followers found themselves in what seemed like an *impossible* scene. Left behind were eerie and bewildering clues.

What makes the scene all the more strange is when we realize that Jesus was *there*, watching His disciples encounter the mystery. Not just Jesus, but also angels. The risen Christ *hides* Himself at first, so that Peter and John do not see Him. And the two angels on site must've been told, "Don't show yourself when Peter and John come into the tomb. Wait till they're gone."

Why would Jesus do this? We *know* He fully intended on revealing Himself in His resurrection glory not just once but *many* times before He ascended into heaven. But *that* morning, He set up a mystery. It begins in verse 1 of John 20.

John 20:1-2 - ¹On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she went

¹ <https://www.popsci.com/environment/slug-ringing-doorbells-germany/>

² <https://linguapress.com/advanced/agatha-christie>

³ <https://coopboardgames.com/statistics/clue-cluedo/>

⁴ <https://www.murdermystery.com/weekends>

running to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said to them, "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him!"

Mary and a number of other ladies wanted to anoint Jesus' body with spices, as was the custom for burial. But they didn't have time to get it done before the Sabbath began on Friday at sunset.⁵

The Sabbath ended sundown Saturday, but they couldn't do what they wanted at night. So they left as early as they could Sunday morning. The sun had not yet risen, though the Son of God had.

Picture it: A murky morning in a graveyard. A heart-broken and confused group of people trying to find their way. This is a classic mystery setup. If it was a movie, we'd be ready for a jump scare.

Mary was not alone, note how she said "We don't know where they've put Him." Also note their mindset. They had *no* inclination that Jesus was alive. No ember of hope. They *went* to the tomb to take care of a body. When they found the tomb empty, they still assumed *not* that He was alive, but simply that He had been moved. After all...Jesus *couldn't* be alive. It was over.

Jesus had been placed in a borrowed tomb. It belonged to Joseph of Arimathea who was a member of the Sanhedrin - Israel's supreme court and congress. Joseph was a good and righteous man. He had not agreed with nor participated in the murderous conspiracy against Jesus.⁶

The fact that this tomb had a circular stone demonstrates how wealthy Joseph was. Archaeologists have excavated over 1,000 tombs in the Jerusalem area and only *four* rolling stones have ever been found. Usually the covering was just a big rock blocking the entrance. A round, rolling stone was typically for kings and queens.⁷ How fitting that Christ's borrowed tomb had one.

Now listen: Some have said that the resurrection was a hoax made up by the disciples. But notice how there is absolutely *no* suggestion of resurrection in their minds. A resurrection hoax? Who would believe a lie like that when *even the disciples* didn't believe it on Sunday morning? No, the story of the resurrection spread *because* it was undeniable. It wasn't a conspiracy, it was *reality*.

John 20:3-4 - ³ At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first.

When is the last situation you were in where you needed to *sprint*? Not for fun or for sport, but for urgency and concern? Mary is *running*. Peter is *running*. John is *running*.

It is touching to realize how much Jesus meant to these people. Their behavior on Easter Sunday demonstrates the depth of their love and attachment to Him. These ladies are carrying many

⁵ Luke 23:55-24:1

⁶ Luke 24:50-53

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-did-jesus-tomb-look-like-interview/>

pounds of spices so that they can apply them to a dead body. I don't know about you, but it would take a *lot* of love for me to be willing to interact with a corpse like that.

They go out, without escort, in the dark, knowing they'll probably have to talk their way through some unfriendly soldiers to get to the body. They'll have the difficult and harrowing task of handling Jesus' remains. It will be one of the hardest things they'd ever have to do, but they cared *that* much about the Lord.

And now we see Peter and John. John is "the disciples Jesus loved," the author of this book. This is an eye-witness, autobiographical story. At the time, the disciples of Jesus were in hiding because they were afraid that they, too, would be arrested and killed.⁸ But hearing this news was worth the risk. *Not* because they thought He might be alive, but because even His burial was *that* important to them. *Jesus* mattered that much to them. In their minds, they'd risk their lives for His dead body.

John 20:5 - ⁵ Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.

John does something important with his words that get hidden in the English translation. He's going to use the word "saw" three times between verses 5 and 8, but each time he uses a *different* Greek term. We just see "saw," but there is a progression as the mystery unfolds.

This first term refers to simple seeing.⁹ He looked inside the opening and saw cloths. I learned something that has changed the way I imagine this scene. I typically imagine a door-sized opening to a cave-sized tomb. I imagine the stone being taller than me - a huge, thick, pizza of rock.

But did you notice how it said, "Stooping down, he saw?" Remember how I said archaeologists have excavated over 1,000 of these tombs? In most cases, the entrance was about *3 feet high*. An adult would have to practically *crawl* in.¹⁰

Seeing the empty cloths would've not only been confusing but upsetting. Remember - in the moment they still haven't understood Jesus was risen from the dead. So that leaves only a couple options. Either the body was *stolen*, or the body was *moved* elsewhere. If stolen, they might have cut open the cloths to get to valuables that were sometimes buried with the dead. But grave robbers would've left the corpse. If the body had been *moved*, they wouldn't have unwrapped it. Jesus had been anointed with more than *75 pounds* of myrrh and aloes.¹¹ So if He was being placed somewhere else, they'd want to keep the package together.

But bloodied cloths on their own? *That's* a mystery that made no sense. It didn't fit the normal expectations.

⁸ John 20:19

⁹ R. Kent Hughes *John: That You May Believe*

¹⁰ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹¹ John 19:39

John 20:6-7 - ⁶ Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ The wrapping that had been on his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself.

Jewish bodies weren't wrapped like mummies. That's another mental image we might need to adjust. Typically, the face, neck, and upper part of the shoulders were left bare.¹² They would sometimes wrap a kerchief underneath the jaw to keep the mouth from falling open.¹³

But there's a new mysterious clue here: The head wrapping was folded up neatly and set in a different place.

Meaning, when He rose, Jesus took His time. It was as if He was checking out of a hotel room. But why? Why fold the wrapping? Why leave these strange clues?

Peter crawls through the entrance and we have our second "saw." This time, John uses a Greek term that refers to looking carefully.¹⁴ He was *observing*. He was being drawn into the mystery.

John 20:8 - ⁸ The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed.

The third "saw" is here, and this time the term means to see with *understanding*. To *realize*.¹⁵ John sees the scene, he remembers what the Lord had said before, he pieces the impossible together and then becomes *the very first person ever* to believe in the resurrection!¹⁶ It's the only answer that fits the clues.

I can't help but notice a callback in the Gospel story. When Christ *first* arrived, how was He found? A Babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a borrowed stable. And now, at the climax of His Incarnate work, what do we find? Swaddling cloths again.¹⁷ That's what He was wrapped in. And He was laid in a borrowed tomb. But this time, it wasn't shepherds who saw Him, but fishermen who *didn't* see Him. He was waiting in the wings, about to have a tender, one-on-one chat with Mary.

John 20:9 - ⁹ For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.

It's not totally clear what Scripture John is referring to, specifically. A good candidate is Psalm 16:10. That's the one Peter references in his sermon at Pentecost when he was talking about the resurrection. But Hosea 6:2 and Isaiah 53:10-12 are other possible candidates.

¹² Henry Latham *The Risen Master*

¹³ Robert Utley *The Beloved Disciple's Memoirs and Letters: The Gospel of John, I, II, and III John*

¹⁴ Hughes

¹⁵ Hughes

¹⁶ Archibald Robertson *Word Pictures In The New Testament*

¹⁷ Hughes

Not only did the disciples *know* these Scriptures, Jesus had openly talked about rising from the dead. So why was it so hard for them to grasp it?

Well, the fact of the matter is, we humans are slow to understand spiritual truths. A person can even have the whole Bible memorized, but not truly *apprehend* it. We see that in the Pharisees of Jesus' time or in many unbelieving academics today. God gives us the revelation of His word so that we might know Him and know the truth, but if we do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit, we won't be able to fully comprehend what God has revealed.¹⁸ We have to not just *know*, not just *observe*, but we must take the step John took: We must *believe*. And as we enter into relationship with God through faith, then the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth.¹⁹

The truth is: Jesus *must* rise from the dead. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then nothing else He said or did matters. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, your faith is worthless, you are still trapped in your sin, and there is no hope. But *since* Jesus *did* rise from the dead, *everything* He said, everything He did, everything He commands now becomes the most important truth you could possibly apply to your life. And you *must* apply it if you want to share in His victory over death. Christ wants to *share* His resurrection power with you, but it is *only* received by grace, through faith in Jesus. This is the truth that the Bible reveals. And it *must* be this way.

John 20:10 - ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Jesus let them go back without revealing Himself. He would soon. But first He had a plan to speak with Mary. Meanwhile, the 12 are left to wrestle with the mystery. To consider the clues. To try to figure out what had happened.

Why? Why the mystery? Why wasn't Jesus waiting there for them that day? Why didn't He *immediately* go to where *they* were? If we're honest, we'd like Jesus to just show Himself to us, too, right? So why did He stage this mystery scene? Because what He wanted for them and what God wants for *us* is to choose to believe. He says as much to Thomas the Twin later in this chapter.

God's desire is to draw us in. He leaves clues. He sends messages. The expanse of the cosmos declares His handiwork. He demonstrates His love toward you. One of the greatest proofs of His love for you *is* the fact that Christ died on a cross. Why did that happen? What did it mean? Read the Gospels. It was for you. So *you* could be rescued from sin, from death, from the grave.

And now, God sends you all the clues, all the information, all the proofs you need to realize He is real, He is alive, He loves you, and He *wants* to be found by you. He wants you to have that moment in any good mystery where all the pieces come together and the main character realizes the truth - the truth that has been right in front of them the whole time. Have *you* realized it yet? The truth of Easter? The meaning of the Gospel? That Jesus is alive and invites you to be His disciple? He's knocking on the door of your heart. Answer the door.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:14

¹⁹ John 16:13