

Reflection for Easter Sunday

In the cathedral of Turin there is a four-metre-long linen cloth bearing the faint image of the front and back of a naked man. Its history can be traced back to 1354 when it was exhibited in a church in France with the claim that it was the burial shroud of Jesus himself. From an early stage that claim was disputed and the local bishop himself denounced it as a forgery. However, its very existence, and the interest it causes, points to the importance of the linen cloths which *“the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved”* and Peter saw in the otherwise empty tomb. They are an important part of the Easter Sunday story.

After his crucifixion Jesus was afforded a dignified and proper burial carried out by two wealthy, influential people, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus which, we heard in Good Friday’s passion gospel, involved *“a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about thirty-five kilograms in weight.”* (Which incidentally is the average weight of an eleven-year-old child). His tomb was well known, and it was the focus of a good deal of concern. When St Matthew’s account of the passion was read last Sunday, we heard how *“the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate”* to request a guard for the tomb lest his disciples come and steal the body, claiming that he had risen from the dead. It also appears that Jesus’ own followers thought the authorities might remove his body lest the tomb turn into a shrine and so when the risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene she *“supposed him to be the gardener and said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you had have laid him, and I will take him away.’”*¹

On Easter Sunday morning the body of Jesus is no longer to be found in the tomb. Had the Roman or Jewish authorities removed the body? Had Jesus’ own disciples stolen it? If the tomb had been completely empty, without the linen cloths, it would probably have been concluded that someone had indeed removed it to a secret location. But the tomb wasn’t empty. The linen cloths were there and *“the face cloth, which had been on the head of Jesus”* had been carefully rolled up and placed to one side. Who, moving the body, would have taken it out of the linen cloths it was wrapped in, sorting out the mess of thirty-five kilograms of myrrh and aloes, and left them behind? Surely, they would have been more likely to take the body as they found it, as quickly as they could, lest they be discovered. So, the linen cloths left behind are an important part of the Easter Sunday story and the evidence on which *“the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved”* came to believe in the resurrection.

Scientific evidence suggests that the Turin shroud is not authentic. However, whatever became of those original linen cloths left behind in the tomb, they are a powerful witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

¹ Jn 20:15