

**The Emperor Has No Clothes: Exposing the Naked Truth**  
Dr. F. Scott Spencer, A Sermon for Every Sunday, Easter 2019  
*Mark 14:50-52; 15:16-24; 16:1-6*

Hans Christian Andersen's famous folktale features an emperor who loved to strut about in sartorial splendor. Accordingly, he hires two tailors to make him an exquisite suit of clothes befitting his inflated self-image.

Knowing the emperor's enormous ego (and the insecurity that goes with it), the tailors pledge to make him the world's finest attire with a special interwoven power that makes them invisible to anyone *unfit* for their positions. In other words, only the truly competent, worthy people would be able to see the king's apparel.

It's a gigantic scam, but *tailor-made* for this narcissistic ruler who promptly broadcasts the project across the kingdom. The tailors make a huge pretense of selecting and crafting the materials with the greatest care. When the grand moment of unveiling the new clothes finally comes, they bring nothing at all; there's *nothing to see*. But everyone, including the emperor, is afraid to say anything for fear they would be judged unfit for their jobs. That was the deal, remember: only the best and brightest could see these garments.

So the emperor strips and allows himself to be adorned with *nothing* but fake clothes the tailors elaborately mime to put on him. He remains naked as a jaybird, but he won't admit it, and neither will anyone else lest they be branded as incompetent boobs.

So out he goes in public in his birthday suit, with everyone feigning admiration for his magnificent new clothes. Everyone, *except* one little child who blurts out: "Look, the emperor has no clothes!" Which starts everyone else buzzing about the obvious truth: the pompous ruler has been had, totally humiliated, though he keeps vigorously denying it.

Too often that's the way it is with powerful people. Chief officials in political, economic, and religious realms prove to be nothing but "empty suits"—self-absorbed, self-advancing narcissists with scant sense of service and duty, truly *unfit*, *unsuited* for their vocations.

Jesus satirized rulers like Caesar and Herod who "dressed in soft robes and fine clothing, living in luxurious royal palaces"—but were good for little else, certainly not for furthering God's kingdom. By contrast, he commended the rough-clad, desert-dwelling John the Baptist as a genuine agent of God. Ditto for Jesus, who told his disciples: one basic outfit's all you need—no extra tunic. And if someone's worse off than you and needs that one "shirt on your back," give it to them! (a different twist on the naked theme).

Jesus comes as Lord and Messiah of God's kingdom *with a whole different idea* of what it means to rule justly and rightly. And it gets him killed by the fancy-dress set who don't fancy having their way of doing things challenged. It gets him stripped and strapped to a Roman cross.

But that's not the end. Easter Sunday exposes a whole new reality: *resurrecting* Jesus to new life, *redressing* the unjust violence done to Jesus, and *re-dressing*, more literally, a special divine messenger, as we will see.

The *naked truth* in Mark unfolds in **three stages**: from Jesus's *arrest* to his *crucifixion*, and ultimately his *burial and resurrection*.

**Stage 1** takes us back to Jesus' *arrest* in Gethsemane. When Judas marks out Jesus with a treacherous kiss, the sword and club-wielding guards take Jesus into custody and lead him away.

And what do his disciples do? "All of them deserted him and fled," Mark tersely states. They all abandon Jesus and hightail it as fast as they can, lest they, too, be arrested.

One follower, however, almost doesn't make it away. Only Mark reports a mysterious "young man" on the scene. We don't know his name or anything about him other than he's a young adherent of Jesus. And he's a tad slow to take off, allowing the guards to grab at him but not successfully nab him.

It is a strange scene. For whatever reason, this "young man" is only sporting a single "linen cloth," and it comes off in the hands of the grasping guards as he dashes away into the night. Meet the first *streaker* in New Testament history.

Well that's a rather shocking "R"-rated image—maybe why the other Gospels omit it. But that begs the key question: Why does Mark include this peculiar scene? What does it really *reveal*?

Some scholars suggest a cameo appearance by Mark himself—kind of like Hitchcock's putting himself in one of his movie scenes. But there's no proof here of Mark's identity, and in any case, it would be an odd way to call attention to yourself, unless you're a frat boy: "Yeah, Look at me. I'm the guy who ran away naked at Jesus' arrest."

No, no. Something more is going on here. Consider two possibilities. First, this young man may symbolize all of Jesus's disciples, exposing their *youthful immaturity*—they're all proving to be "young" novices in the faith; and their *shameful insecurity*—they're all are more concerned with saving their own skins than with supporting Jesus and, consequently, expose their cowardly skins for all to see—not least, Jesus himself.

He sees their bare backsides as they flee, leaving him stripped of support and leaving the movement strapped for leadership. Do we really expect these guys to step up and continue the work after Jesus' death?

Second, this "young man" might also represent something else, as a pastor-friend recently suggested to me. Periodically in the Bible, a "man" or "men" who appear suddenly function as angelic figures, special messengers of God or mediators of God's presence. If that's how we should view Mark's "young man," we have an even more haunting picture.

Not only do Jesus's earthly followers abandon him at his most critical hour. But even the presence of God seems more distant. In *Matthew's* account, Jesus tells his captors: "Don't you know I could call 12 legions of angels and they'd wipe you out in an instant. You couldn't arrest me if I didn't allow it." *Mark*, however, takes a different tack. This one young-man "guardian angel," if that's what he is, leaves Jesus to fend for himself. No angel seems at Jesus' beck and call now. No one in heaven or earth seems on Jesus' side at this moment. The naked truth begins to dawn that he will suffer and die alone.

Which propels us to **Stage 2** in this clothing drama: Jesus' *crucifixion*. We need not linger long here. The facts are as patent as they are painful.

Roman soldiers first decide to play a little dress-up game with Jesus, stripping him of his own clothes and replacing them with a purple cloak, mocking his kingly claims. To complete the outfit, he needs a crown, which they fashion out of hard, thorny nettles and ram down into his skull.

They add insult to injury with sham salutes and bellows of "Hail, King of the Jews!" The subtext is clear: this is what happens to royal pretenders who dare challenge Caesar's authority. They then strip him (again) of this purple robe, slap his own clothes back on him, hustle him to Skull Hill (Golgotha), nail him to splintery planks of wood, and crucify him.

But the soldiers heap on yet more abuse, stripping Jesus again (the third time), tearing his clothes into pieces, and gambling for the best souvenirs. Maybe they've got a grisly collection somewhere of crucifixion swatches. Maybe they're just bored. It takes several hours for crucifixion victims to die: might as well pass the time with a little amusement.

Whatever the soldiers' motivation, the fact is that Jesus dies thoroughly exposed, completely bare: the King of the Jews has no clothes. For modesty's sake, most artistic representations paint or sculpt at least a loin cloth for the crucified Jesus. But that's not the way it was. He died as naked as he came into the world, as art routinely depicts the *baby* Jesus. From start to finish, Jesus comes to us, as Richard Rohr remarks, as "God incarnated into vulnerability and nakedness" (*Universal Christ*, 123).

Jesus' stark suffering only intensifies in his last gasps of breath. Six hours into the crucifixion at 3:00 PM, the sky already eerily dark, Mark's Jesus unleashes his gut-wrenching final cry: *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani. My God, God why have you forsaken me?*

Have you left me, too, Father? Like the betraying Judas, the denying Peter, the deserting disciples; like the streaking "young man" at the arrest—whether disciple, angel, whoever: *Have you, my God, nothing to offer me at my direst hour but abject abandonment, bare bereavement, naked nothingness?*

And so Jesus dies utterly bereft. It is the single darkest moment in human history. *But* it is by no means the end—for Jesus or us. In fact it signals the beginning of a new world-redeeming hope—which dawns, not surprisingly, with *re-clothing, re-dressing*.

And so we come to **Stage 3**—Jesus’ *burial and resurrection*. Amazingly, one Joseph of Arimathea—a member of the Supreme Jewish Court, no less—asks Pilate for Jesus’ body to give it a decent burial. This is highly irregular. Normally, crucifixion victims were left to hang dead for the predations of vultures and wild dogs; then, the mangled, tortured remains would be thrown into a burning garbage heap.

But this Joseph respectfully lays Jesus’s body on a stone slab in a rock tomb. Oh—and note well—he wraps Jesus’ body in a *sindōn*—the same term denoting the *linen cloth* the “young man” left behind at the arrest scene.

And speaking of the *young man* ... After his brief appearance and ignominious exit, he returns for the grand finale staged at Jesus’ tomb.

Early Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome come to anoint Jesus’ body with spices to bring a whiff of fragrant life into the deathly vault. By the way, the male disciples are still nowhere to be found. They’re hiding somewhere: it’s the *women* who lead the way.

And this way turns out to be a lot more than they bargained for. They’d been concerned about how they would roll the heavy boulder from the tomb’s entrance. But when they arrive, it’s already removed. That’s good. So they walk right in. But then things get really strange.

As they take in the scene, they notice, much to their alarm, that there’s no *body* to anoint. Jesus’s corpse is not there. But someone else is there, and he’s not dead. He’s sitting up on the right side of the burial slab. Somehow I imagine him with legs crossed and lips forming a pleasant smile. He seems quite relaxed, while the women are absolutely—and understandably—beside themselves.

Only Mark identifies this mystery guest as a *young man*. Hmm ... but ***uh oh***: Is he ...??? Whew: No, it’s OK. We soon learn that he’s ***dressed in a white robe***, thank God! Is he a young disciple of Jesus? Is he an angelic messenger of God? Hard to say, but in any event, he sure seems like that very figure who fled away naked from Jesus. He’s back—in glorious white apparel now. Darkness has given way to light. Nakedness has been covered.

And this robed young man has an important message for these women: “Don’t be alarmed. You’re looking for Jesus who was crucified. He’s been raised from the dead. Look here’s the place they laid him—this empty, *naked* place.”

King Jesus, Emperor Jesus, the Viceroy of God’s realm is risen from the darkest, starkest death imaginable. ***And this Emperor has clothes***. He is vindicated as the *fittest*, most well-suited ruler with consummate love and power to bring true justice, peace, righteousness, and wholeness into a broken world.

And he has a walk-in closet you wouldn’t believe, full of beautiful robes in every shape and size for every one of us flawed, unfit, vulnerable, naked creatures.

Just as the women walked into the tomb that first Easter morning to discover the naked truth of Jesus' resurrection, the invitation is open for us to enter Jesus' capacious wardrobe chock full of bright, fresh new clothes for us to put on and begin to explore the wonderful new world of God's kingdom—a world of recovery ... *re-covering*, re-dressing, restoring, renewing, rejuvenating under the right-making rule of our risen Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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