

# Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."  
Isaiah 40:31*



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## The Ark and the Empty Tomb

John's account of the resurrection includes an odd little detail that is easy to overlook. But a closer examination reveals a significant connection to an Old Testament relic.

*"You shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end" (Ex. 25:18-19).*

*"But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain" (Jn. 20:11-12).*



Commentaries on the gospel of John often mention the striking similarity between what Mary saw in the tomb and the physical description of the ark of the covenant. The Scriptures do not offer an explanation that would connect these stories, but the wording is too similar to be mere coincidence.

The ark of the covenant was the single most important relic to the ancient Israelites. This ark, which contained the stone tablets given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, rested in the innermost chamber of the tabernacle, the "Holy of Holies."

The lid that covered this ark—a slab of pure gold—was called "the mercy seat." On each end of the mercy seat was a cherub, or angel, facing its counterpart on the other end. (If you watched the Spielberg movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you've seen a good representation of what the ark and these cherubim looked like.)

God described the mercy seat as the place where He "will meet with you, and . . . speak with you" (Ex. 25:22). It was accessible only to the High Priest, and he could come into its presence only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest would make atonement for the sins of all the people by sprinkling the blood of a sacrifice on the mercy seat, in the presence of God.

The ark disappeared from history at the destruction of Solomon's temple in the sixth century B.C., and was never replaced. According to Josephus, the Holy of Holies in Herod's temple during the time of Christ was completely empty. The Jews continued to worship God at the temple, but the physical relic that connected them to God was gone.

That brings us to John's account of the resurrection. John records that Mary Magdalene saw two angels in the empty tomb. But why does he add the little detail that the angels *sat on each end* of the ledge where Jesus had been laid?

The parallel to the cherubim over the mercy seat is unmistakable. The empty Holy of Holies in the temple had now been replaced by an empty tomb. The former offered no permanent solution to sin; the latter abolished the final barrier between God and man. In both cases, angels guarded a sacred place, but the empty tomb in one stroke provided access to God for all humanity.

One final thought: In the tabernacle, it was the High Priest alone who had the right to come before the mercy seat and see the cherubim. In the empty tomb, it was a woman with a tainted past and a deep love for her Savior, who came into the presence of the Divine. The angels in the empty tomb of Jesus are inviting *all of us*, whatever our social status, whatever our past mistakes and failures, to come into the presence of God. The resurrected Jesus has opened the way!

— David King



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