

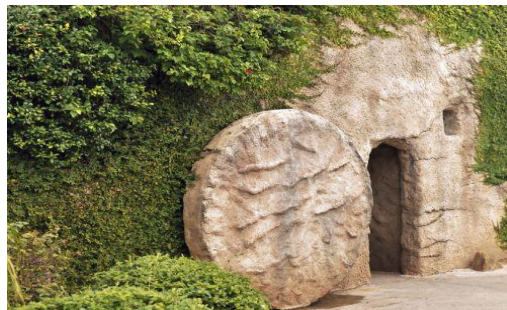
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## Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts, Part 2

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In part one of this series, I briefly examined some of the details of the Gospel accounts that are difficult to harmonize and provided a framework for viewing differences between the Gospel accounts.

Now, we must address the question of whether or not the Gospels provide irreconcilable accounts of the events surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is there a way in which the details recorded in each Gospel, described by the various writers from their unique vantage points, can all be true? Or are the differences truly irreconcilable?

There is, in fact, more than one way to account for all the details. There is more than one possible series of events on that first Resurrection Sunday Morning that would explain the alleged discrepancies. I will present one possible scenario—the one I believe best accounts for all the details.

It is essential in our attempt to reconstruct the events of that first Resurrection Sunday Morning, to remember that each of the Gospel writers wrote from his own unique vantage point.<sup>i</sup> John is the most unique, describing the events at the tomb through the eyes of Mary Magdalene. John does not even mention any of the other women present, but instead focuses entirely on the response and actions of Mary. This is probably, in large part, due to the fact that it was through the testimony of Mary that John first heard of the empty tomb (John 20:2).

### The Earthquake

As the women were on their way to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus (Luke 24:1), an earthquake split the calm serenity of that early morning. Though Matthew begins the narrative of that Sunday morning by speaking of the women, he's clear to say that an earthquake "had occurred," the implication being that the earthquake and the events immediately surrounding it, had happened before the women

arrived.<sup>ii</sup>

In conjunction with the earthquake, "an angel of the Lord descended from Heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it" (Matthew 28:2).<sup>iii</sup>

Understandably, the appearance of the angels, the earthquake, and the violent rolling aside of that large stone, struck terror into the hearts of the Roman soldiers stationed at the tomb. They shook with fear and "became like dead men" (Matthew 28:5).

It is probably safe to assume that sometime before the women arrived, the angels disappeared from sight and the Roman soldiers regained enough composure to gather their possessions and head into the city to report to "the chief priests all that had happened" (Matthew 28:11).<sup>iv</sup>

### The Women

When it comes to the question of who came to the tomb that Sunday morning, each of the Gospels provide different details.

Matthew names "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (Matthew 28:1). Mark names three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1). Luke identifies five different women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and "the other women" (Luke 24:10). Though Luke leaves at least two women unnamed, we may suppose that one of those women is Salome mentioned by Mark. Matthew's "other Mary" is most likely "Mary the mother of James" mentioned by both Mark and Luke. John only names one woman, Mary Magdalene, and tells the entire narrative from her perspective (John 20:1). The only woman named by all four Gospels is Mary Magdalene.

These lists of names should not be taken as comprehensive. Though each Gospel writer mentions a different number of women, we cannot assume that any one of them was giving what they thought to be a comprehensive list of those who

went to the tomb. Luke gives the fullest accounting, and his may indeed be a comprehensive list of all the women who went to the tomb that morning, but of that we cannot be sure.

We must admit a great deal of uncertainty as to the way in which the women traveled to and arrived at the tomb. It is often *assumed* that all of the women traveled together and arrived together. None of the Gospels say anything to indicate this. There are any number of possible scenarios by which the women would have come to the tomb.

They could have all traveled separately, arranging previously to meet at the tomb at or before dawn. They may have traveled in two or more groups, starting from different locations within the city of Jerusalem and arriving at the tomb at separate times. They may have arranged to meet together at some location and then travel from that common location out to the tomb. It is possible that all of the women traveled the entire distance from one location out to the tomb, and all arrived together.

### **The Tomb**

All of the Gospel accounts mention the fact that when the women arrived at the tomb, they saw the stone rolled away. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record what transpired at the tomb from the perspective of the women who stayed at the tomb. John, and John alone, records the fact that Mary Magdalene ran to tell Peter and John the stone had been moved.

Mary Magdalene did not stay at the tomb long enough to examine the inside or to see the angels that appeared to the other women. When she arrived at the place where Peter and John were staying, she said to them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:2). She made no mention of the angels and their declaration that Jesus had risen. Mary didn’t mention this, because she was not at the tomb when the angels appeared to the other women who stayed behind at the tomb. Apparently, Mary Magdalene was either dispatched to, or she volunteered for the job of informing the principal disciples that the tomb had been disturbed.

While Mary Magdalene made her way to Peter and John, the other women stayed behind at the tomb to examine the scene.<sup>v</sup> They did not see an angel sitting on the stone, since by this time, the angel that appeared to the soldiers had vanished.

Luke records that the women went into the tomb

and “did not find the body of the Lord Jesus” (Luke 24:3). Then, “while they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing...” (Luke 24:4). Luke says that two angels appeared to the women whereas Matthew and Mark only mention one. This is often alleged to be a contradiction. However, the fact that Matthew and Mark only focus on the words of one angel, and do not mention the other angel, does not mean that there were not two angels present. It just means that Matthew and Mark only mention one of them.<sup>vi</sup>

The angel informed the women that Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he said, and gave the women instruction to go and tell the disciples what they had seen.<sup>vii</sup> These women immediately left the scene and ran to tell the disciples.

### **The Disciples**

While the other women were at the tomb seeing the angel, Mary Magdalene was in Jerusalem informing Peter and John. These two men immediately left to go out to the tomb to see the scene for themselves, with Mary Magdalene apparently following close behind (John 20:3-11). Peter and John arrived at the tomb after the other women had left. They did not see an angel. Having examined the tomb, they left and “went away again to their own homes” (John 20:10). John left believing and Peter left bewildered (John 20:8; Luke 24:12).

A worthwhile question might be raised at this point: If the other women were coming into town, and Peter and John were leaving town, why didn’t they meet each other? There are a number of possible ways to account for this.

First, in the northwest corner of Jerusalem—the corner near which Jesus had been buried—there were two separate gates through the city wall. It’s entirely possible that the women came in one gate while Peter and John went out the other, in which case, they would not have seen each other. This is particularly likely if the women entering the city already knew that Mary Magdalene had gone to inform Peter and John and had thus set out to inform the rest of the disciples who were likely in a different location(s).

Second, even if they were headed to see Peter and John, it is possible that, having gone through the gate, they would take a different route than Peter and John had taken to the tomb.

Third, it is possible that the women did not go into the city at all, but immediately left, heading east to Bethany to tell the other disciples.<sup>viii</sup>

After Peter and John left the scene of the empty

tomb, Mary Magdalene was left there alone. This is when Jesus chose to make His first post-Resurrection appearance (John 20:11-18).<sup>ix</sup>

### **The Other Detail**

The harmony I have offered above accounts for all of the alleged contradictions and difficulties except one: Was it dark or light?

When it comes to the question of *when* the women arrived at the tomb, John seems to be in disagreement with the synoptic Gospels. Matthew says that the women came “as it began to dawn” (Matthew 28:1). Mark says that it was “very early” and “the sun had risen” (Mark 16:2). Luke says it was “at early dawn” (Luke 24:1). Yet John says that “Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark” (John 20:1). How is it possible that “it was still dark” (John) when “the sun had risen” (Mark)?

There are actually three different ways that this difference could be harmonized.

First, it is likely the women did not all travel together. If Mary Magdalene traveled earlier, and arrived at the tomb before the other women, even by just a few minutes, she may have arrived at the tomb while it was “still dark.” Then she may have lingered a few minutes waiting for the other women to arrive, having already arranged ahead of time to meet them at the tomb. Once they arrived, Mary set out to tell Peter and John (John 20:2). If that is the case, then the other descriptions of the day being light referred to when the other women arrived at the tomb, but John’s description of it being “still dark” referred to when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb.

Second, some suggest that John is describing when Mary *left* for the tomb, not the moment at which she *arrived* at the tomb. You may notice that the passage reads, “Mary Magdalene *came* early to the tomb.” The Greek term is not restricted to speaking of an “arrival.”<sup>x</sup> The word can be used to describe coming to something or going away to something. It is a word used to describe both coming and going. The language of the verse can just as easily be taken as describing when Mary left her residence to go to the tomb.

Third, John’s description, combined with others, may be an indication that we are talking about those few moments at dawn when one person would describe it as being “still dark” and another person would describe it as being “light.” If you are a morning person, you described those minutes as “light.” You would say the sun is up and the dawn has come. If you’re not a morning

person, you would describe those minutes as “dark” and wish that people would let you sleep.

However, since Mark says that “the sun had risen,” it seems best to understand John’s description of the darkness as referring to the time when Mary left for the tomb, not when she arrived at the tomb.

### **Wrong Assumptions**

The assertion that there are contradictions between the Gospels can only be maintained if certain assumptions are made. First, it must be assumed that all the women who visited the tomb *traveled* together. Second, it must be assumed that all the women who visited the tomb *arrived* together. Third, it must be assumed that all the women who visited the tomb *stayed* together.

If we assume that all the women traveled together, arrived together, and stayed together, then we are forced to conclude there are irreconcilable differences between the Gospel accounts. But as we have seen, these assumptions are not warranted from the text. These assumptions must be challenged.

We have no reason to believe all the women traveled together. We have no reason to believe that all of the women arrived at the same time. We have no reason to believe that all the women stayed together. In fact, in John’s Gospel, we are told that Mary Magdalene left the group to go inform Peter and John that the tomb had been disturbed.

When we let the Bible speak for itself, and do not force our assumptions on the text, we are presented with a completely harmonious account (through four independent authors) of the events that transpired on Resurrection Sunday Morning.

### **The Resurrection Appearances**

After the resurrection, the Lord appeared to His disciples over a period of forty days (Acts 1:3). Scripture records ten post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Placed in chronological order, they were as follows:

#### **On Resurrection Sunday:**

1. Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18; Mk. 16:9)
2. The other women (Matt. 28:8-10)<sup>xi</sup>
3. Cleopas and an unnamed disciple (Lk. 24:13-31; Mk. 16:12)
4. Peter (Lk. 24:32-35; 1 Cor. 15:5)
5. Disciples without Thomas (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-23; 1 Cor. 15:5)

## Eight Days Later (following Sunday):

6. Disciples with Thomas (Jn. 20:24-29)

## Next Few Weeks:

7. Seven disciples (Jn. 21:1-24)

8. 500 brethren (1 Cor. 15:6; Matt. 28:16-20)

9. James (1 Cor. 15:7)

## Fortieth Day (Ascension):

10. All apostles

(Mk. 16:15-20; Lk. 24:44-53;

Acts 1:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:7)

There are no contradictions in the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. There are differences, but those differences are not contradictions. When we let the text speak for itself

and take the details at face value, we find four complementary, harmonious accounts of the events of Resurrection Sunday. It is only when we bring unwarranted assumptions to the text that we are forced to conclude that one or more of the Gospel writers got the details wrong.

The testimony of Scripture, the testimony of history, and the testimony of eyewitnesses agree: He is risen! He is risen, indeed!

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<sup>i</sup> The accounts of the Resurrection and the subsequent appearances can be found in Matthew 28:1-20; Mark 16:1-20; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew is the only writer to mention the earthquake.

<sup>iii</sup> The language used in the Gospels to describe the position of the stone once rolled away is an often overlooked detail. Mark 16:3 records that as the women were approaching the tomb, they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" The women knew that the stone was large and heavy, and they were not quite sure how they would move it. (This may also indicate the women were unaware that a unit of Roman soldiers had been stationed at the tomb; otherwise they might have expected to elicit the help they needed from some of those Roman soldiers.) When the women arrived, Luke says they found the stone rolled away. Luke doesn't say the stone was rolled away from the "entrance," but that it was rolled away from the "tomb," using the word that describes the entire sepulcher. John used language even more graphic, saying that Mary saw "the stone already taken away from the tomb." "Taken away" translates a word (Gk. ἀίρω) which means to "take up, take away, pick up, and carry." As Leon Morris notes, "The verb has the meaning 'lift up,' 'take up,' and is not the word we might have anticipated. When the stone was put in place it was 'rolled'. John may imply violence, all the more so since the preposition following is 'ek.' This seems to imply that the stone was lifted out of the groove in which it ran" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995, pg. 734). Like Luke, John does not say the stone was rolled away from the entrance, but from the "tomb." Taken altogether, the Gospels appear to describe the position of the stone not as having been gently rolled to one side, but as having been picked up and taken away from the entire sepulcher.

<sup>iv</sup> There is no indication in any of the Gospels that the soldiers were at the tomb when the women arrived.

<sup>v</sup> Once we understand that Mary Magdalene did not stay with the other women, all of the apparent discrepancies and "contradictions" between the Gospel accounts immediately vanish! Again, it is only if we assume that all of the women

stayed together that we face contradictions.

<sup>vi</sup> It *would be* a contradiction *if* Matthew said, "There was only one angel at the tomb," and Luke said, "There was not one angel at the tomb, but two."

<sup>vii</sup> All three Gospels report what the angel said, offering a summary of the angel's statement (Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:5-7) The wording of each account is different, as each author puts into his own words what the angel said to the women.

<sup>viii</sup> It is quite reasonable to assume that the other disciples did not spend the weekend inside Jerusalem (it being a hostile environment for followers of Jesus), but instead stayed in the town of Bethany, 2 miles east of Jerusalem, at the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The route to Bethany (east) would have been the most natural route of escape for the fleeing disciples as the crowd came from Jerusalem (west) to the base of the Mount of Olives to arrest Jesus.

<sup>ix</sup> Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John 20:11-18) and then appeared to the other women as they were on the way to tell the disciples (Matthew 28:8-10). See the list of resurrection appearances provided below.

<sup>x</sup> It is variously translated in the New Testament as arrival (1), arrived (1), brought (1), came (225), come (222), comes (64), coming (87), entered (2), expected (3), fall (2), falls (1), give (1), go (1), going (2), grown (1), lighting (1), next (1), turned (1), went (18) (Thomas, R. L. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries: updated edition*. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

<sup>xi</sup> Some mistakenly believe these first two appearances are accounts of one appearance to the same group of women. This misunderstanding occurs when it is assumed that the women *stayed together* after arriving at the tomb. We learn from the Gospel of John that Mary Magdalene left the group and returned to the tomb later with Peter and John. By this time, the other women had already left. Therefore, these must be two separate appearances. Once we understand that, the discrepancies between the accounts disappear. They are not contradictory reports of the same account, but two separate accounts of two separate appearances.