

## **A Comparison of the Gospels Resurrection**

*[The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### **Introduction**

Today we will continue our look at the gospel accounts of the major milestones in the Lord's life with a study of the resurrection. The relevant Bible chapters are Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20. We will try and piece together the accounts of the four gospel writers to get a complete view of what happened in what order on this wonderful and enormously important day. I don't claim that the order of events which I will present is guaranteed to be 100% accurate, some details are hard to place exactly on the timeline, but it should help us to piece together all the elements we find in the gospel accounts of that day.

We will consider ten events that occurred on the day of the Lord's resurrection – the first Easter Sunday.

### **1. The resurrection itself**

Matthew is the only gospel which appears to give an account of the resurrection itself rather than the immediate aftermath. This is Matthew 28:2-4,

“And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.”

In this account an earthquake is followed by the appearance of a single angel who rolls away the stone and sits on it; the job being completed, and death, the great enemy of mankind, having been defeated. The guards are the only witnesses to this. The stone was removed to allow the guards, and the other witnesses we shall subsequently consider, to see the empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes. The risen Christ, who could pass into locked rooms, did not need a stone moving to release Him from the tomb!

### **2. Various women visit the tomb**

Matthew mentions “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary”, Mark speaks of “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome”, Luke refers to “The women who had come with Him from Galilee... and certain other women, while John writes as if only Mary Magdalene was present. There is no reason why the gospel writers should not mention the women who are most important to their accounts – just because Matthew, for example, does not mention Salome does not mean that she was not there, just that Matthew does not feel the need to record her presence. The simplest way to reconcile all the accounts is that a group of women, and they were all women, set out together to visit the tomb. Quite early on, Mary Magdalene ran off to tell Peter and John what they had found.

The timings given for the visit by the four gospel writers diverge a little, ranging from “while it was still dark” in John, to “as the first day of the week began to dawn” in Matthew. If you assume that

the ladies' journey commenced in the dark and concluded, with them reaching the tomb at day break, then there is no difficulty with the variations.

The devotion and love of these brave women is in the foreground at this point. These women were some of the last on the scene at the Lord's burial, watching where He was placed, and they were the first witnesses of the resurrection, arriving at the tomb just as soon as the Sabbath regulations permitted.

### **3. The appearance of angels**

We have already noticed the first angel, present at the resurrection itself. Matthew says that this angel, who had terrified the guards, spoke comforting words to the women and sent them to tell the disciples that the Lord was risen. Mark speaks about "a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting" in the tomb. It is easy enough to see that he is the angel that Matthew refers to and Mark records a similar commission to tell the disciples, but with a specific mention of Peter. Luke records that "two men stood by them in shining garments." John states that Mary Magdalene "saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain", but says nothing about the angels sending messages to the disciples. Doubtless there were two angels, even though two of the gospels focus on just one of them. We need to put all of the accounts together to get the complete message which they gave to the women.

The angels offered words of reassurance to the women, just as the angels who had heralded the Lord's birth had needed to reassure those they spoke to. It appears that the glory of angels makes them frightening to those to whom they appear! These angels directed the women to look at the empty tomb as evidence that the Lord was risen, and then sent them away as witnesses.

### **4. Peter and John's visit**

John tells us how Mary Magdalene went to Peter and John to tell them that Jesus' body was not in the tomb. She says nothing about angels or resurrection, so perhaps she had run away from the tomb before the other women saw the angels and heard what they said. Peter, John and Mary all then run back towards the tomb. John, the youngest, and presumably the fittest, reaches the tomb first, peers in and sees the discarded grave clothes, but does not enter. Peter arrives a little later, and with characteristic exuberance, runs straight inside the tomb, seeing the linen cloths lying and the cloth that had been placed over the Lord's face folded separately by itself. These are the first male witnesses of the resurrection. They do not see the angels or the Lord Himself, but they see the empty tomb and the remaining grave clothes that testify to His not being there.

The grave clothes are evidence that the body has not been stolen, as the guards will later be paid to claim, since you would hardly undress a body to take it away, and even if you did so hurriedly, you would not carefully fold up the facecloth and leave it in another place by itself. Jesus no longer needed the grave clothes nor the tomb, since He was risen! Peter and John still had limited understanding at this time of what had really happened.

### **5. Jesus' first appearance**

A consideration of John's account shows us that Mary Magdalene arrived back at the tomb after Peter and John had both left. She stood alone outside the tomb weeping, clearly not yet understanding that her Lord had risen from the dead, and then peered into the tomb itself. There she saw the, "two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain." Presumably these are the two angels that the other women had seen earlier. Interestingly, the angels had not made themselves visible to Peter and John: the angels testimony seems to have been only for the women. The angels asked Mary why she was weeping and then had nothing further to say. Mary then turned around, to face away from where the body had been, and saw someone she presumed to be the gardener. In fact it was the risen Lord! She recognised Him as soon as He called her by name.

This was the first appearance of the Lord after His resurrection. Again, it is to a woman, indeed a women who had once been demon-possessed. Mary then received her own commission to tell others about the wonderful resurrection, with the difference that Jesus referred to the disciples as His brethren and then added a reference to His ascension and the new relationship with the Father. This is much more than what the angels said to the other women.

## **6. Jesus' second appearance**

“So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.’”

So Matthew records Jesus second appearance after His resurrection in Matthew 28:8-10. The group of women had been obedient to the instructions of the angels and had set off to tell the disciples the amazing news! Now Jesus Himself appeared to them. Obedience doesn't always results in rewards quite as immediate and as striking as this, but their belief in the message of the angels, their obvious joy at the news of the Lord's resurrection, and their willingness to instantly obey the command to tell others the good news, resulted in them being the second witnesses (after Mary Magdalene) to the risen Lord. Note again that no male disciple has yet seen the angels or the risen Lord.

There is some difficulty in reconciling this account and that of John with the words of Luke 24:10-12 which say,

“It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them. But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marvelling to himself at what had happened.”

I assume that Luke is collapsing several events into a single, brief account. If Mary Magdalene spoke to Peter and John (as the gospel of John states) and the group of other women spoke to the whole group of disciples as Matthew and Luke report, this could be simply contracted into the single statement that Luke makes. Indeed Mark 16:9-11 tells us that Mary Magdalene told the wider group of disciples what she had seen after Jesus had appeared to her, but they did not believe what she said. In this way, all the accounts can be reconciled. The fact that Luke does not mention John going to the tomb with Peter fits with the summary style of Luke's account – placing together a number of events without the full details of any of them.

## **7. The guard**

We have previously noted that Matthew mentions, in chapter 28 verse 4 that the guards shook with fear at the appearance of an angel. In verses 11 to 15 of the same chapter we read,

“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Tell them, “His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.” And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you

secure.’ So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.”

The phrase “while they were going” refers to the group of women going to speak to the disciples after Jesus had appeared to them, thus placing this event on the timeline for us.

The first report of the guards to the chief priests was an accurate one, but the chief priests consulted with the Jewish elders and quickly decided that they could not risk these guards giving an account that would point to a miraculous resurrection. So the people whose job it was to teach God’s truths to the nation bribed the soldiers to tell lies about what had happened. It is striking that these leaders made no attempt to check if the report of the guards was true and to see if Jesus really had risen from the dead. They had already decided that Jesus was not to be believed in and sought to close down any evidence that contradicted that view. How sadly common such an approach is today, with people deciding against Christ and all the evidence of His resurrection before ever giving it any genuine consideration.

### **8. Jesus’ third appearance**

There is no direct scriptural record of the Lord’s third appearance – His appearance to Peter alone. The closest we have is the statement in Luke 24:34,

“The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”

Luke reports this as having been said immediately after the two from the road to Emmaus had returned and spoken to the company of believers, with the inference that it had occurred shortly before that time. Logically, it cannot have occurred before the women were sent to tell the disciples and Peter of His resurrection, or before Peter and John ran to the tomb. We also have the report from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5,

“That [Christ] was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.”

John chapter 21 records the restoration of Peter as an active servant of the Lord, following Peter’s denial of Jesus at the time of His trial. That happened in a public situation, with the other disciples looking on – just as Peter’s denial of the Lord and his previous statements, recorded in Mark 14:31,

“If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!”

were made in public. This third appearance is so private that we don’t even have a gospel record of it. We can only presume that the tough disciple Peter, who had wept bitterly when Jesus had looked at him after his denial, had his personal relationship with his Lord gently restored with just the two of them present. How typical of the Lord to carefully distinguish which matters need to be dealt with publicly and which are between a servant and his Master only!

### **9. Jesus’ fourth appearance**

Mark covers the appearance of the Lord to the two on the road to Emmaus very briefly, saying only,

“After that, [Jesus] appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either” (Mark 16:12-13).

Luke gives a much more detailed account, concluding,

“So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying,

'The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!' And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:33-35).

Mark says that Jesus appeared "in another form", whereas Luke states that,

"Their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him."

Rather than being a contradiction these are two ways of describing the same thing, that is, something about the Lord's form prevented the eyes of these two people from identifying Him.

There is also an apparent contradiction between the statement of Mark that the testimony of these two was disbelieved by the people in Jerusalem and Luke saying that they responded by saying,

"The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"

One possible reconciliation of these accounts is that the company in Jerusalem did initially disbelieve the testimony of the two but they then, quite quickly, received and believed the report of the Lord appearing to Peter. There is little doubt that an appearance to the prominent disciple Peter would have had more impact than His appearance to two little known, and unnamed disciples who were fleeing Jerusalem in despair!

How lovely Luke's well known account is, of the two who have turned away from Jerusalem disappointed and with faith failing, but who fell into conversation with a man they did not recognise. They told Him, as if He needed the account (!), about all that had happened with the Lord's death and also spoke about the message from the women who went to the tomb and the visit of Peter and John. These details help us to place this event in its proper order. Having heard all this, the Lord upbraided them for their lack of faith and commenced a most wonderful exposition of the scriptures. Just imagine the recently resurrected Lord, giving two people a personal explanation of all the Old Testament predictions and prefiguring of his life, death, and rising again! No wonder that their hearts burned within them! While they had sat eating a meal with Jesus they had suddenly recognised Him and He had vanished from sight. This is perhaps the first indication of the remarkable abilities of the Lord's resurrection body to act in ways far beyond the normal human body.

Having walked, wearily at least initially, miles away from Jerusalem they then marched enthusiastically back to tell the other disciples what had happened! In doing so they followed the pattern of all the other believers we have encountered, but they were the first to act from sheer joy, with no recorded exhortation from the Lord for them to tell other people. It seems that they just couldn't resist the urge to spread the good news!

## **10. Jesus' fifth appearance**

Luke follows straight on from the account of the two on the road to Emmaus with this,

"Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, 'Peace to you.' But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, 'Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled, He said to them, 'Have you any food here?' So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence" (Luke 24:36-43).

This appears to correspond with Mark 16:14, immediately after Mark's account of the two on the road to Emmaus, where we read,

“Later [Jesus] appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.”

John has a parallel account in John 20:19-20:

“Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”

Verse 24 of this chapter makes it plain that the disciple Thomas was not present on this occasion. This is not in contradiction with Mark's reference to Jesus appearing to “the eleven”, since the phrase “the eleven” refers to the closest circle of disciples (now that Judas Iscariot is dead) to distinguish them from the wider group of Jesus' followers, it does not indicate that all eleven are necessarily present.

It is intriguing that the women to whom Jesus appeared welcomed His presence with immediate joy, even worship, accepting Him instantly, while the core group of disciples responded with fear, thinking that Jesus was a ghost! Mark tells us that Jesus, “rebuked their unbelief”, presumably summarising what Luke records as the gentle interrogation of the disciples' slowness to believe and His offering to the disciples to handle Him to confirm his possession of a real body. Luke also tells us about Jesus eating before the disciples, thus giving us another little insight into the nature of the Lord's resurrection body.

It should be said that although the disciples were slow to believe, and reproved by the Lord because of that slowness, once they were convinced that they really were seeing their risen Lord they were filled with joy. John 20:20b says,

“Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”

### **The commissioning of the disciples**

I haven't numbered this with the other ten events since I am not sure it occurred on the day of the Lord's resurrection. Let me explain!

Matthew 28:16-20 is the passage often described as the Great Commission. Matthew locates this on a mountain in Galilee and therefore some time later than the resurrection day.

Mark gives an account of the Lord sending the disciples into all the world straight after the Lord's fifth appearance, but he follows it with an account immediately afterwards of the Lord's ascension, so it is not totally clear when this conversation about being sent into all the world actually occurred.

Likewise, Luke gives an account of the Lord commissioning His disciples sandwiched between the events of the resurrection day and a record of the ascension.

John also gives an account of the commission which he records somewhere after the fifth appearance of the Lord and before His appearance to the eleven, with Thomas, on the next Lord's day.

Maybe all that we can say is that the Lord spoke to His followers about their call to make disciples on more than one occasion between His resurrection and His ascension. Such a commission is strongly connected to the resurrection, since it springs directly from it, but we cannot be sure when exactly these instructions were given.

### **In Summary**

I have confined myself to the events of the resurrection day itself. There were, of course, other appearances of the Lord before His ascension to heaven, but they are outside our scope for today. Perhaps it is just worth noting that I have numbered the Lord's appearances, as well as I am able to, on the day of His resurrection, regardless of who He appeared to. When we read in John 21:14,

“This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead,”

John is numbering the appearances of the Lord to the disciples as a group, not every appearance.

Although there are parts of the gospel accounts of the resurrection which are hard to fit together, we should never lose sight of the sheer wonder of the events of that day, or their eternal significance.

Lord Jesus, never let us get so lost in reconciling the details of the accounts of Your life that we lose a sense of the majesty of them. Especially, make us thankful that You are raised from the dead, our sins are forgiven, and that, one day, we shall have resurrection bodies like Yours. Amen.

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