

20:1-31 | The Resurrection

This next section covers Jesus' *bodily* resurrection from the dead (20:1-31). While all four gospels have a *version* of this scene, each writer has put this event in his own words, making each retelling *distinct*. This is nothing new for John's readership; most of the things he's relayed up to this point have been unique, and what follows is no different.

As we'll see, the Beloved Apostle supplements material hitherto unknown in the gospel tradition. Admittedly, resolving all the *alleged* discrepancies between the narratives would require extensive commentary.¹ This is not to say such an endeavor is impossible. Many commentators have provided perfectly plausible explanations for the seeming contradictions in the resurrection accounts.² But such a specialized focus is beyond the scope of this study, especially since all the variables are, at best, *trivial* (e.g., the precise timing of events varies; the identities of those who first saw the empty tomb differ; the number of angels and what they say diverges; etc.).³ Therefore, our focus will primarily be on comprehending what the Beloved Apostle has chosen to convey about this historical day. It is crucial to grasp John's account *before* attempting to reconcile it with the others, as it provides a unique and insightful perspective.

Remarkably, of everything that occurred on that very first Easter Sunday, John discusses only a handful of events: the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb (vs. 1-9), his interaction with Mary Magdalene (vs. 11-18), his appearance before the disciples (vs. 19-23), and his conversation

¹ Due to the difficulty of reconciling the resurrection versions, many critics will point to these supposed discrepancies as proof that the account is fictitious. And while *complete* harmonization between the four gospels is nearly *impossible*, such a conclusion is hardly proof that the event is imaginary. A *variation* is not a *contradiction*. Arguably, *minor* differences ought to be expected when judging eyewitness accounts. Otherwise, a *perfect* correlation between testimonials would suggest the account had been fabricated (e.g., criminals coordinating narratives to avoid all inconsistencies). Furthermore, the resurrection accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John agree on the most *important* details: the resurrection occurred early on a Sunday; the empty tomb was witnessed by multiple women and men; there was an angelic appearance; many people conversed with the resurrected Jesus; and so on (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-7). It is remarkable that four *unique* accounts written decades apart by four *diverse* authors (Mark/Luke weren't even apostles, and Luke was a gentile), likely in four *different* locations, have so many points of similarity without being carbon copies of one another.

² See John Wenham's book, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (2005); General Editors, "Can the various resurrection accounts from the four Gospels be harmonized?" Got Questions, gotquestions.org/resurrection-accounts.html, [accessed January 21, 2025]; Chaffey, Tim, "Christ's Resurrection—Four Accounts, One Reality," April 5, 2015, *Answers In Genesis*, answersingenesis.org/jesus/resurrection/christs-resurrection-four-accounts-one-reality/, [accessed January 21, 2025].

³ Carson (1991), p. 632.

with Thomas (vs. 24-29). Lastly, the Beloved Apostle rounds out this portion by conveying the *purpose* of his account (vs. 30-31).

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of Jesus' resurrection. Paul reminded the church in Corinth, "For I delivered unto you *first of all* [emphasis added] that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The phrase "first of all" is the Greek word **πρῶτος** (*prōtos*) and while it primarily refers to something that's *first in a sequence* (cf. Mat. 10:2; Lu. 13:30; Jn. 20:4), the way in which it is used in this context means it should be understood as referring to something that's *first in rank* (cf. Matt. 22:38; Lu. 15:22; Eph. 6:2).⁴ This is evident by the fact that a few verses later, Paul says, "If Christ be not raised," then that means our "faith is vain," we are "yet in your sins," those Christians who've died have forever "perished," and, as such, "we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:17-19).

While Christians may hold differing views on many matters, the resurrection is nonnegotiable; it is a matter of *first* importance. The day the Son of God rose from the dead is either the *greatest day* in history or the greatest hoax in history. Our stance on this issue ultimately determines whether we are believers or unbelievers.

Exegesis

20:1-2 – Nothing is known about what transpired between Jesus' burial and his bodily resurrection. As with the Synoptics, John moves straight to "the first day of the week"—i.e., Sunday—where "Mary Magdalene" is described as visiting Jesus' "sepulchre." Of course, this is the same Mary who, after being delivered by Jesus from a seven-fold demonic possession (cf. Mar. 16:9), supported him financially while accompanying him in his travels (cf. Lu. 8:2); she was also one of the key witnesses to both the Lord's crucifixion (cf. 19:25) and his burial (cf. Mat. 27:61).

John tells us that Mary Magdalene set out to the tomb "early, when it was yet dark."⁵ It is quite possible that she is alone at this point. If so, this means Mary Magdalene visited the tomb on two separate occasions. This would explain the difference between her message of despair in verse 2 compared to the one of hope recorded in the Synoptics (cf. Mat. 28:8; Lu. 24:8-11). On her first trip, she assumed someone had stolen the body, whereas, on her second trip, because she had interacted with the risen Lord, her tune had changed. However, it is just as likely that

⁴ BDAG, p. 893.

⁵ Carson (1991), p. 635, "John emphasizes the darkness of the dawn because he is still using light/darkness symbolism: the darkness of the hour is the perfect counterpart to the darkness that still shrouds Mary's understanding."

this is an expansion of the accounts recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.⁶ If so, this means Mary Magdalene wasn't alone (cf. 19:38-42; Lu. 23:50-56); "Mary the mother of James...Salome" (Mar. 16:1), as well as "Joanna...and other women" (Lu. 24:10), all accompanied her to the tomb that morning.⁷

Interestingly, this sorority didn't come to the cemetery just to pay their respects; they came for a special purpose: to anoint Jesus' body with even more spices (cf. 19:39-40; Mar. 16:1c). Due to the Sabbath being so close at hand by the time they took Jesus off the cross, these women were unable to honor their master properly. Admittedly, they might've been able to perform this task on Saturday, but the Sabbath didn't end till sundown, which likely prevented them from coming. Anointing Jesus' body would not only be safer during the day, but daylight would ensure it would be done properly. So, Mary Magdalene and her companions did not delay, coming at first light on Sunday. They took the first opportunity they had to commemorate Jesus Christ. And, as we'll see, their prompt arrival will ensure that they're the first to discover something remarkable.

Instead of finding a stone covering the entrance to the tomb, as they had expected (cf. Mar. 16:3), John says the women saw "the stone taken away from the sepulcher." At which point, John tells us that Mary Magdalen "ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [aka, the Apostle John], and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."⁸ Ironically, despite knowing better, the Sanhedrin will accuse the apostles of something similar. To control the narrative, the religious leaders will claim that the disciples "came by night and stole [Jesus' body] away while [the soldiers guarding the tomb] slept" (Matt. 28:13). Such a statement, at the very least, acknowledges that Jesus' body went missing, a fact which Jesus' followers would not dispute.

However, while body snatching is a plausible theory for the sudden disappearance of Jesus' body, such an explanation doesn't stand up to scrutiny. In defense of the Sanhedrin, it doesn't make sense that a group would go to such lengths to kill Jesus only to then exhume his body. A tomb that remained sealed (cf. Mat. 27:66) and undisturbed would've been validation for the

⁶ The Greek of Mar. 16:2 (**ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου**) is variously translated: "when the sun had risen" (ESV; NASB; NKJV), "just after sunrise" (NIV), "at sunrise" (CSB), and "at the rising of the sun" (KJV). The variety of translations shows that Mark's verbiage is imprecise. Most likely, Mary came to the tomb *at* or *after* sunrise. If so, John makes it clear that Mary started her journey "while it yet dark," but by the time she arrived at the tomb, the sun at risen (cf. Köstenberger (2008), p. 561).

⁷ John only mentions Mary in verse 1, implying that she was alone; but Mary's use of the plural pronoun, "we," in verse 2 implies that she wasn't alone. However, Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 371, shows that some commentators are convinced that her usage of "we" isn't a "genuine plural; [instead,] it reflects an Oriental mode of speech whereby plural can be used for singular."

⁸ Mary's mention of a missing "body" and not just the stone door being displaced implies that she looked inside.

Jews. And, in defense of the disciples, grave robbing would've been nearly impossible, especially in the way in which they were accused—i.e., while the soldiers slept. The type of stones used to seal tombs, whether disk-shaped or cork-like, were “extremely difficult to move once it was in place.”⁹ Archeological studies of first-century tombs reveal that stone doors such as these would've weighed “one-and-one-half to two tons.”¹⁰ Thus, it is unlikely that the disciples would have been able to open Jesus' tomb, which had been sealed with a substantial stone, without *waking* the Roman soldiers. A better lie (though even this isn't without its difficulties) would have been to say that the disciple overpowered the guard.

Regardless, it is worth noting that the empty tomb did not, in and of itself, encourage Mary Magdalene; quite the opposite, it produced *hopelessness* (cf. vs. 11). She could not fathom that, perhaps, there was another possibility. Of course, Mary isn't to be criticized, but her gut reaction illustrates how grief can cloud a person's judgment. Death can drive even the most devout person to despair. But, as Mary herself will soon learn, Jesus' resurrection changes everything. And however unlikely it may seem, no one removed his body from that tomb. The Lord walked out under his own power. Thus, in the words of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” And the truth of the resurrection means that, even in death, we can hope (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8; 1 Thess. 4:13).

⁹ Gower (2005), p. 69.

¹⁰ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, (Nashville, TN; HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017), p. 254.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 93 | John 20:1-2

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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Christians can disagree about a great number of things. But the resurrection is nonnegotiable; it is a matter of *first* importance (cf. Ac. 10:34-43). The day the Son of God rose from the dead is either the *greatest day* in history or the *greatest hoax* in history. And where we land on this issue ultimately determines whether we're believers or unbelievers (cf. Ac. 26:23-24).

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