

Reconciliation of the Resurrection Accounts

By Elder David Pyles

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all give accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These accounts differ on several points. Bible critics often adduce these differences as evidence that the witness of the Apostles is not credible and that the Bible contains contradictions. These differences are in fact reconcilable and are no more than should be expected of independent witnesses. Of course, if these witnesses are true on this one event, then all infidels and other rivals to Christianity must admit that any other criticisms they have of the Bible are mere trivialities.

The various accounts of the resurrection can be reconciled to the following order of events on that momentous day:

1) The first important event of that morning was the resurrection itself. As explained by Matthew (Mt 28:2-4), an angel descended from heaven and rolled the stone from the entrance of the tomb. The guards placed at the tomb by Pilate (Mt 27:62-65) witnessed this, but were bribed by the Jews into silence (Mt 28:11-15). None of the disciples witnessed the descent of the angel, the removal of the stone or the actual resurrection. These events had already occurred by the time the first disciple discovered the open tomb. Matthew therefore moves backward in time in Mt 28:2-4 relative to Mt 28:1 (note that the word "there was a great earthquake" could be translated "there *had been* a great earthquake"). The facts in these verses were revealed to Matthew by the Holy Spirit, and corroborated by rumors leaked from the testimony of the guards (Mt 28:25). Matthew was the only writer to tell of guards being placed at the tomb, and this he likely did to account for the facts he recorded. Several events transpired between Mt 28:4 and Mt 28:5, as is shown by considering the other gospel writers.

2) As explained by John (Jn 20:1-18) and Mark (Mk 16:9-11), the first disciple to discover the missing body was Mary Magdalene, who went alone to the tomb early in the morning while it was yet dark. Upon seeing that the stone over the entrance to the tomb had been removed, she hastily ran to inform Peter and John.

3) Peter and John then ran to the tomb with Mary (Jn 20:1-18). Peter entered the sepulchre and saw that the body was gone and

that the grave clothes were neatly arranged in the tomb. John probably noted the neat arrangement of the grave clothes in his book to show this was not the likely work of a grave robber. Upon seeing the empty sepulcher, John apparently believed Christ was raised from the dead (Jn 20:8), but this was not the case with Peter, who thought the body had been stolen. Peter and John then returned to their homes. As of this time, none of the disciples had actually seen Jesus or any heavenly beings.

4) Knowing that the Jewish authorities suspected a resurrection conspiracy (Mt 27:62-66), and therefore knowing that the disciples of Jesus would surely be charged with the theft of His body, Peter and John had reason to be very concerned about the situation. Since the Jews had crucified Jesus upon fabricated charges, the Apostles had reason to believe their lives were in danger. This being the case, they were likely precautionary about the things they had seen at the tomb and said very little about them. It is certainly the case they were in great fear (Jn 20:19).

5) But Mary remained at the tomb weeping. While there, she saw two angels in the tomb, and then Jesus appeared unto her outside the tomb (Jn 20:11-16). This was the first time heavenly beings were witnessed by a disciple, and it was the first appearance of Jesus after the resurrection (Mk 16:9). Mary attempted to touch Him in an act of worship, but the Lord would not allow this because He had not yet ascended to the Father (Jn 20:17). Mary then returned and informed others of what she had seen, but they did not believe her (Mk 16:11). They likely assumed her to be delirious with grief.

6) So a party of women who had formerly purposed to visit the tomb after the Sabbath to prepare the body (Lk 23:55,56) continued with their plans notwithstanding the testimony of Mary. This party included Joanna, Salome, Mary the mother of James, Mary Magdalene, and others (Mk 16:1; Lk 24:10). These women, apart from Mary Magdalene, likely had not heard the testimony of Peter or John at this point. It was very early in the day, and therefore possible they had not yet encountered Peter or John, and even if they had, the Apostles might have kept their discovery confidential because of the considerations in point (4).

7) These women arrived at the tomb as it was beginning to dawn (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2), whereas it was yet dark when Mary made her first journey to the tomb (Jn 20:1). This serves to confirm that the various scriptural accounts relate several trips to the tomb, with at least three involving Mary Magdaline – one by herself; one with the Apostles and one with the other women.

8) These women discovered that the tomb was open, even as Mary had said. After entering the tomb, they saw an angel, who informed them that Jesus had been resurrected, and that Jesus would show Himself to the disciples in Galilee (Mt 28:5-7; Mk 16:5-7). The women also saw two men in shining garments, who corroborated the testimony of the angel, and who reminded the women that Jesus Himself had promised these things (Lk 24:4-8). These two men were possibly Moses and Elijah. Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded this account of the resurrection likely because it was the first discovery involving multiple witnesses, both heavenly and earthly. John recorded the earlier events because one of the purposes of his gospel was to relate events and details that other writers had not considered. Mark's account (Mk 16:1-11) combines those things attested by Matthew, Luke and John.

9) Upon returning from the tomb, the women encountered Jesus, and they held Him by the feet in an act of worship (Mt 28:9). Since Jesus had forbidden this to Mary in the account of John (Jn 20:17), this further confirms that John recorded a different trip to the tomb than Matthew and Luke. Mark recorded both trips.

10) These women then returned to Peter and reported their discovery. Peter, now confronted with multiple witnesses claiming to have seen Jesus and heavenly beings at the tomb, rushed to the tomb a second time. This event was recorded by Luke (Lk 24:12), who claimed that Peter ran to the tomb, then stooped and looked in. This contrasts with the event related by John, who claimed that he and Peter both went to the tomb with Mary Magdaline, and that Peter actually entered the tomb. These differences show that different trips were under consideration.

When several professed witnesses to an event all give the same testimony in the same terms, this suggests collaboration is involved. But when several witnesses give different but reconcilable testimonies leading to the same conclusion, this

constitutes the strongest case for that conclusion. The witnesses to the resurrection gave independent yet reconcilable testimonies to that great event. This in conjunction with the testimony of prophecy and personal experience give what is a convincing case that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

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