

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE RESURRECTION

A superficial reading of the accounts of the resurrection in the four Gospels may suggest that there are many points of disagreement among them. Closer examination reveals a remarkable degree of unanimity, and suggests that in fact the apparent discrepancies provide evidence that although the Gospel writers obtained their information from different sources in the early Church, all four had the same basic tale to tell. Anyone who has heard evidence from different witnesses to an accident knows how in that situation people with different interests, backgrounds and emotional makeup tend to notice and remember different elements in a composite picture.

The first witnesses who first saw the empty tomb were a group of women who had recently been under severe emotional strain. Immediately after the momentous discovery they would appear to have scattered in order to take the news to different people. So it is not surprising that the accounts vary in detail. It would be indeed more surprising, and the evidence would in a sense be less valuable, if they did not. The variation suggests that the writers collected their evidence from more than one source, which makes the over-all agreement of the four accounts all the more impressive. The events in the records can be set out more or less as follows:

The Bible Evidence

- A group of women go to the tomb early on the first day of the week to embalm the body of Jesus (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1, 10; John 20:1a).
- They discover that the stone has been rolled back (Matthew 28:2-4; Mark 16:3-4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1b).
- The body of Jesus is no longer in the tomb; instead they see an angel who explains the situation and gives them a message (Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:3-7).
- The women run back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples, and are greeted in the main with disbelief (Matthew 28:8; Luke 24:8-11, 22-23; John 20:2).
- Peter and the “other disciple whom Jesus loved” go to the tomb and find it empty; they then return home (John 20:3-10; Luke 24:24).
- Mary Magdalene follows them back to the tomb, and remains there after they have left. Jesus then makes His first appearance to her (John 20:11-18; Matthew 28:9; Matthew names Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”).
- On that same day He appears to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5), to the two going to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32; Mark 16:12-13), and then to the rest of the disciples apart from Thomas back in Jerusalem (John 20:19-23; Luke 24:36-43; Mark 16:14). There were other appearances recorded in the four Gospels, Acts 1, and 1 Corinthians 15. What emerges from all the accounts is a remarkable consistency on two points – that Jesus could now reveal Himself and disappear at will and that He only showed Himself to His followers.

Apparent Discrepancies

- Which women went to the tomb? Apparently Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, Joanna, and “the other women from Galilee” (Luke 23:55). John singles out Mary Magdalene for mention (John 20:1) presumably because it was she who brought information back to Peter and the other disciples: she herself implies in 20:2 that there were others with her – whom we do not know. So the writers could each be mentioning by name those of the party whose behavior made an impact on those from whom the writers gained their information.
- When was the stone rolled back? Mark 16:3-4 and Luke 24:2 imply that it had been rolled back before they arrived on the spot. Then Matthew 28:2-4 could have happened before their arrival, and as a result the guards went off back to the city (in 28:11-15 the guards have already presumably reached the city and are busy spreading their tale by the time the women are on their way back from the tomb).
- How many angels were there? When the women arrive, the angel who descended to roll back the stone (Matthew 28:2) has moved inside the tomb and been joined by another (Luke 24:4 – Mary Magdalene also sees two, John 20:12). Matthew and Mark may refer only to the one who acted as spokesman, and therefore engaged the attention of their informants, and the plural in Luke 24:5 (“the men said”) may refer loosely to the fact that while one spoke the other corroborated.
- What did the angels say? Again, the accounts can be put together to help us see the whole picture:
 - Do not be afraid. We know why you have come.
 - Jesus is not here because He has risen.
 - Look at the empty tomb.
 - Tell His disciples: He is going to meet you in Galilee.
 - Remember how He foretold all this.
- Who was the first to see Jesus? Mark 16:9 says He first showed Himself to Mary Magdalene, and this agrees with John’s story. Luke has nothing to conflict with this. In Matthew 28:9 Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (the key figure) and the “other Mary”. It seems likely that this is the first appearance, and natural that when the story went around Mary Magdalene was named and the other Mary forgotten (just as the other Gospel writers mention Bartimaeus, but not the other blind man; and Legion, but not the other demoniac – and only Matthew in each case mentions the pair).

It has been pointed out that Matthew and Mark both record appearances of Jesus to the disciples in Galilee, and Luke and John in Jerusalem. In fact, of course, John 21 takes us back to Galilee, and Mark in his postscript refers to the Jerusalem appearances. In the case of Matthew and Luke, it accords with the purpose and structure of the writers for Luke to conclude his Gospel where he began – in Jerusalem – and for Matthew to conclude with the King’s final proclamation on a mountain (28:16-20).