

CHAPTER 14

JESUS' RESURRECTION, APPEARANCES, AND ASCENSION

[*Harmony*, pp. 237-247]

Part 13: The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ

Every gospel concludes with a thrilling account of the resurrection of Christ. In every case the story of the resurrection is told from the standpoint of the disciples; the actual resurrection itself is not described. Rather, we are confronted with the empty tomb and the subsequent post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

It is obvious that the gospels do not copy each other in this area. There are considerable differences in detail, showing that they are independent accounts. Yet these can be harmonized to present a coherent picture of the great events of the days after Jesus' crucifixion and before his ascension.

Harmonistic Problem #11: The Empty Tomb and Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances

The problem

Each Gospel records the activities at the tomb and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances differently.

Activities at the Tomb

Matt 28:1-8

Toward dawn
Two Marys

	Angel—tell disciples
Mark 16:1-8	Sabbath was past (very early, sun had risen) Two Marys & Salome Angel—tell Peter & disciples
Luke 24:1-12	Early dawn Two Marys & Joanna & other women Two angels
John 20:1-2	1 st day, still dark Mary Magdalene No angel (later, two angels, v. 12) No resurrection idea Later: Peter & John run Jesus appears to Mary alone

Appearance of Jesus to the Women

Matt 28:9-10	Jesus appears to women
[Mark 16:9-11] = John 20:14-18	Jesus appears to Mary alone
Luke 24:10-11	No appearance to women (cf. 1 Cor 15:5-7)

Place of Jesus' Appearances

Matt 28:7 = Mark 16:7	Go to Galilee
Luke 24:6	Told you when he was in Galilee
Matt 28:16	Great Commission in Galilee
Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:8-9	Final commission on Mount of Olives (v. 12)
John 20	In Jerusalem
John 21	At Sea of Galilee

The solution

These differences, while bewildering at first sight, are not irreconcilable. They do show the Gospel accounts to be independent, and thus add to the historical reliability of each (cf. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*).

[An interesting book on the resurrection is by the English journalist Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (1930; often reprinted). Morison began as a skeptic, intending to disprove the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. But his research led him to believe in the resurrection, and write this apologetic work.]

Three modern, excellent, and thorough defenses of Jesus' resurrection:

- N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003)
- Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case of the Resurrection of Jesus* (2004)
- Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (2010; 718 pages!)

(1) Activities at the tomb and first appearances to the women

A harmony of the activities at the tomb and Jesus' first appearances to the women has been worked out satisfactorily by A. T. Robertson (*Harmony*; also in Thomas & Gundry, pp. 237-239) as follows:

(1) Saturday afternoon, late, Matt 28:1

Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of James and Joses look to check.

(2) Saturday evening, Mark 16:1

Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joses, and Salome (sister of Mary mother of Jesus, John 19:25; cf. Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40) bring spices [Gk. "buy" spices]. They leave them probably at Joseph's house to use on Sunday morning ("that they might go").

[Thomas and Gundry put (1) and (2) together.]

(3) Before dawn, Sunday morning, Matt 28:2-4

The actual resurrection would have occurred sometime after sundown, the “third day”; after actual resurrection, appearance of the angel to the soldiers (known about later by revelation, or perhaps by soldiers’ or priests’ testimony)

(4) At dawn, Sunday morning, Mark 16:2-3 = Luke 24:1 = John 20:1

Women come to anoint body: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James and Joses, other women (names in Luke 24:10)

(5) Same time, John 20:1-2

Mary Magdalene runs ahead of others, finds tomb empty, leaves tomb before others arrive, runs to tell Peter and John.

(6) Shortly afterward, Matt 28:5 = Mark 16:5-6 = Luke 24:4

Other women arrive; two angels are outside the tomb, one speaks. Women leave to tell disciples.

(7) After #5, Luke 24:12; John 20:2-10

Mary Magdalene finds Peter and John, who probably were closer than the other disciples. Peter and John run to tomb, no one there. Peter and John leave tomb.

(8) After #7, John 20:11-17; [Mark 16:9]

Two angels appear to Mary in the tomb; Jesus appears to Mary outside the tomb. Mary leaves to tell disciples.

(9) After #6, Matt 28:9-10

Jesus appears to the other women, who were on their way to tell the disciples the message of the angels.

(10) After #7 and #8, Mark 16:8, [10-11]; Luke 24:9-11; John 20:18

Mary and other women tell disciples, are not believed.

Just as the activities around the tomb can be harmonized, so the various appearances of Jesus can be traced according to their geographical setting:

(2) Early Jerusalem appearances

- First Sunday:
1. To Mary Magdalene (John & [Mark])
 2. To other women (Matt)
 3. To two going to Emmaus (Luke)
 4. To Simon Peter (Luke & 1 Cor)
 5. To apostles without Thomas ([Mark], Luke, John)

Next Sunday: 6. To eleven apostles, including Thomas (John)

The early appearances promised a new meeting in Galilee (angels at tomb—Mark 28:7 = Mark 16:7; cf. Luke 24:6; Jesus to the women—Matt 28:10).

(3) Middle appearances in Galilee

Now it was the end of Passover week, and the disciples could travel back to Galilee.

Days not specified:

7. To seven disciples at lake (John)
8. To disciples on mountain (Matt, phps. [Mark])
—Perhaps the 500 people at once (1 Cor 15:6)
9. To James (1 Cor 15, perhaps in Jerusalem)

(4) Later appearances in Jerusalem

With the feast of Pentecost approaching, the disciples returned to Jerusalem.

10. Final teachings in Jerusalem (Luke, Acts 1)
11. Ascension from Mount of Olives, near Bethany (Luke, Acts 1, [Mark])

The Empty Tomb

The empty tomb is a demonstrated fact of history. Whatever explanation people may make for the belief in Jesus' resurrection, they must account for the empty tomb. Jesus' enemies could not produce his body.

Sec. 169: *The tomb visited by the women*

Since Jesus had been staying with his disciples at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, we can assume that the women from Galilee were staying there still. Thus they waited until the Sabbath was over (Saturday evening at sunset) before taking spices to the tomb. The women may have been taking these spices to Joseph's house, intending to use them to anoint Jesus' body in the daylight hours later. Thus, this verse from Matthew and Mark may have taken place Saturday evening. Three women are named: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (the mother of James and John).

Sec. 170: *The stone rolled away*

Matthew alone describes the earthquake that accompanied the resurrection (or followed it). Perhaps he received this information from one or more of the guards who were at the tomb. He also had knowledge of their later arrangements with the high priests to lie about these events.

The rolling away of the stone was for the purpose not of allowing Jesus to pass out of the tomb, but in order to allow the disciples to go *into* the tomb and see that it was empty. The powerful angel of the Lord shows the mighty work as being done by God.

Sec. 171: *The tomb found to be empty by the women*

Very early on Sunday morning a group of the women went to the tomb to use the spices brought earlier and anoint Jesus' body. The preparing of the body done Friday afternoon by Joseph and Nicodemus was necessarily hasty. This was now to be more careful and thorough.

It appears that Mary Magdalene ran ahead of the other women, arrived at the tomb first, saw it was empty, and then ran to tell Peter. She apparently did not see an angel at that time. The other women then arrived at the tomb, found it empty, and then saw two angels (Luke says two; Matthew and Mark mention only one), who told them that Jesus was risen and sent them to tell the disciples.

The best text of Mark ends with this event: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." This may be the original ending, or the original ending may have been lost. The so-called shorter ending, middle ending, and long ending, found in various later manuscripts do not seem to be original. The *Harmony* prints the traditional "middle" ending, found in the KJV, in brackets.

Sec. 172: The tomb found to be empty by Peter and John

Luke and John both record the coming of Peter to the tomb after he heard the story of the women. John says he was accompanied by John, “the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.” They saw the empty tomb, with the cloths still folded as they had been wrapped around Jesus’ body. At that point John “believed.”

Post-Resurrection Appearances

There were various possible explanations for the empty tomb. However, when the disciples saw the resurrected Jesus Christ, they knew that he truly had been raised from the dead, and they became his sincere and enthusiastic witnesses.

Sec. 173: Appearance to Mary Magdalene

John relates this touching story in detail. Having left the women to go ahead and see the tomb, she saw it was empty and ran to get Peter and John. Then the women arrived and saw the angels and then left. When Peter and John arrived, they saw the empty tomb and then left. Mary stayed behind, and Jesus himself appeared to her. She was the first person to see the risen Lord.

Mary wanted to hold on to him, but Jesus said she could not, for he must depart the earth and go to the Father.

Sec. 174: Appearance to the other women

Matthew alone relates how Jesus appeared to the other women, on their way back to report the empty tomb. Apparently this took place shortly after his appearance to Mary in the garden.

Sec. 175: Report of the soldiers to the Jewish authorities

Matthew, familiar with the goings-on with the temple guards, reports this interesting interview. The trumped-up charge that Jesus’ disciples stole the body of Jesus has been put forth from time to time in the history of gospel criticism (see *Harmony*, p. 240, n. v).

Sec. 176: Appearance to the two disciples traveling to Emmaus

Luke relates this beautiful account of the two disciples (one of whom is named as Cleopas or Clopas; he was the husband of Mary, sister of Mary mother of Jesus [John 19:25]) on the way to Emmaus. Note how Jesus emphasized the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures, and how they predicted his death and resurrection (Luke 24:27, 32; cf. vv. 44-45). It is obvious already in these appearances that Jesus at this time had the power to move instantly from one place to another, and thus to appear and disappear from his disciples' vision.

Sec. 177: Report of the two disciples to the rest

While those two disciples had gone, Jesus appeared privately to Peter. This is mentioned by Luke, and was listed as an important event by Paul (1 Cor 15:5).

Sec. 178: Appearance to the ten assembled disciples

Luke and John tell of Jesus appearing that first Sunday evening to the ten disciples, with Thomas missing. Jesus' resurrection body is seen as possessing several important features: he can pass into locked rooms, it is a real body with flesh and bones, he can be felt, he can eat normal human food (broiled fish). Jesus commissioned the disciples to carry on the spiritual work of the church. According to John, when Thomas returned, not having seen the appearance, he did not believe it.

Sec. 179: Appearance to the eleven assembled disciples

John continues with this account of Thomas' "conversion." It was now the following Sunday. This time Thomas was present, and declared his faith in Jesus' resurrection, "My Lord and my God." The translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, that Thomas was swearing, is totally unwarranted.

The resurrection and these first two appearance to the disciples being on a Sunday, was the primary reason for changing the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday, according to the early church fathers.

If "the Twelve" in 1 Corinthians 15:5 refers to the disciples in this appearance, then it probably includes Matthias, who was a witness of the resurrection, or else is a general term for the apostles.

Sec. 180: Appearance to the seven disciples while fishing

After the week of Passover the disciples returned to Galilee, as the angel had instructed them. Peter decided to return to his fishing, at least for the time being.

In this beautiful and tranquil epilogue, John recounts a memorable meeting with Jesus and some of his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. The group of disciples is similar to that which followed him at the beginning:

John 1:35-51

(John) & Andrew
Simon Peter
Philip
Nathanael

John 21:2

Simon Peter
Thomas
Nathanael
Sons of Zebedee (James & John)
Two others (perhaps Andrew & Philip)

The large catch of fish would have reminded Peter and the others of the time that Jesus called them by the Lake several years previously. The particular number of fish (153) does not appear to be significant, but only to indicate the large catch (it's a "triangular number" = $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17$).

After Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus now gave him the opportunity three times to affirm his love for Jesus. Jesus then predicted how Peter would die as a martyr.

John concludes his gospel with a marvelous statement of purpose and conclusion (John 21:24-25; cf. 20:30-31).

Sec. 181: Appearance to the eleven in Galilee

Matthew mentions that Jesus appeared to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and there gave them the Great Commission. Paul mentions that at one time Jesus appeared to over five hundred of the brothers at once (1 Cor 15:6); this may have been that occasion, as Jesus' followers were more numerous in Galilee, and would have been farther away from the Jerusalem authorities.

Sec. 182: Appearance to James, Jesus' brother

This is mentioned only by Paul (1 Cor 15:7). We do not know when or where this took place, although it is feasible that it took place during this time in Galilee. James did not believe when Jesus was on the earth, but now he was to become a leader in the church. By the time of

Pentecost, James and his brothers and mother were disciples, waiting for the Holy Spirit with the others (Acts 1:14).

Sec. 183: Appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem

After spending several weeks in Galilee, the disciples were ready to return to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. Luke, in his gospel and in Acts, records the fact that Jesus appeared to them and taught them about the kingdom of God during the whole forty days between his resurrection and ascension. The disciples, after all this teaching, believed that the kingdom promises to Israel would be literally fulfilled (Acts 1:6). Jesus instructed his disciples to wait for him in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would be given to them in a powerful way, enabling them to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The Ascension

Jesus was to return to heaven until the kingdom would be given to him at his second coming. During this interval his church is to be his witness, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Sec. 184: Christ's parting blessing and departure

Luke is the writer who describes the ascension of Jesus into heaven at the end of the forty days. This ascension was given for the disciples' sakes; it was an indication that he would come “in the same way.” Zechariah had predicted that the Messiah would come and stand upon the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4); and that is where Jesus was standing when he went into heaven. Encouraged by the angels, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and awaited the promised coming of the Holy Spirit.