

John 20:1–9
“We Believe in the Resurrection” (Part I)

Introduction

We left off last week with the body of Jesus laid in the tomb before sundown on Friday. With the eyes of faith, we saw already in the burial of Jesus’ body the promise of His resurrection. This morning, we come to the empty tomb and the accomplished historical fact of the resurrection of our Lord.

Perhaps nowhere in the Bible are there more apparent “contradictions” than in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. There are many who appeal to these contradictions in order to discredit the Bible and therefore—apparently—to discredit even the resurrection itself. But in fact, the apparent contradictions only demonstrate all the more the “sheer facticity” of the resurrection (facticity: “the quality or condition of being a fact” [Oxford languages]). In other words, it’s precisely the resurrection of Jesus *as a verifiable historical fact* that *allows* and even gives rise to the four very different perspectives from which that single historical event is recounted. Even if there *were* real contradictions, this would not delegitimize the witness of the four Gospels (we would never argue the same way with other sources witnessing to other historical facts.) Apart from the real historical fact of the resurrection, the Gospel narratives as they stand—especially with all their apparent contradictions—can never be accounted for.

And yet, as it happens, the “contradictions” are only apparent and never real. Sometimes the tensions are resolved by recognizing the presence of certain literary techniques. With “historical compression” two events separated by time are *recounted* as following immediately one after the other—even though they didn’t, and even though the author doesn’t actually say that they do (we’ll see an example this morning). A first-century author might even recount a historical detail out of order (embedding that historical detail in a new location) for literary reasons (we’ll see an example of this next week). While he doesn’t explicitly say that the events happened in this order, we would naturally assume they did apart from other evidence. But that’s okay, because in this case, the historical order of the events is not part of the evangelist’s point. First-century authors were recording real historical events, but they weren’t seeking to be comprehensive. Where one Gospel records two angels, another records only one. Where one Gospel records only one woman, the others record two, or three, or four.

Those who automatically assume contradictions in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are usually not only arrogant (because they require that first-century authors work under the same literary conventions that we do today), but also driven by the pre-commitment of unbelief (even as I am driven by the pre-commitment of belief). In the end, we may not know how exactly all the apparent tensions are to be resolved, but there are always reasonable guesses that we can make. This week and next week, we’re going to put together a likely harmony of the four Gospels not simply to defend the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, but primarily to bring into even clearer focus that “sheer facticity” of the bodily resurrection of our Lord. This is part of John’s own agenda here in chapter 20. Why, after all, do we believe in the resurrection?

We left off on Friday, the day of preparation for the Sabbath. Now we pick up again on the day after the Sabbath — the first day of the week.

I. John 20:1 — Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone taken away from the tomb.

Luke says, “on the first day of the week *at early dawn*” (Lk. 24:1). Mark says, “*very early* on the first day of the week... *when the sun had risen*” (Mk. 16:2). John tells us that Mary “came *early* to the tomb, *while it was still dark*.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that Mary “*arrived*” at the tomb while it was still dark. It could easily mean that she was *on her way* to the tomb while it was still dark. And “dark” doesn’t have to mean “pitch dark”; it could mean—and almost certainly does mean—the dark of the twilight just before sunrise. Apparently, then, Mary set out from her home before the sun had risen, and by the time she arrived at the tomb, the sun had risen. Matthew captures this idea when he says, “*as it began to dawn toward* the first day of the week (Mat. 28:1). The variation in the Gospel accounts (an apparent contradiction) actually ends up testifying to the truthfulness of both historical accounts.

But if Matthew, Mark, and Luke all emphasize the dawn and the sunrise, why does John emphasize the darkness? The Greek word for “darkness” appears in Matthew twice, in Luke once, and in Mark never. But this is now the eighth time that John uses this word. We could say that this is a “John word.” “Darkness,” in John, is almost always used metaphorically to refer to a spiritual darkness (1:5; 6:17; 8:12; 12:35, 46). “Night” is also used metaphorically for a spiritual darkness (Jn. 9:4; 11:10). At times, it appears that John draws attention to the literal “night” as a way of emphasizing a spiritual darkness: Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” (3:2; 19:39); when Judas went out to betray Jesus, “it was night” (13:30). So it seems likely that John emphasizes the “darkness” just before the dawn as a subtle way of drawing our attention to the darkness that had settled in Mary’s mind and heart — the darkness that the “sunrise” was about to dispel (cf. Jn. 16:19-20). Both John and Mark are historically accurate, but they choose different historical details in order to make different theological points.

We know from the other Gospels that Mary Magdalene wasn’t alone. Matthew tells us that “Mary Magdalene **and the other Mary** came to look at the grave” (Mat. 28:1). Mark tells us that “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, **and Salome**... came to the tomb” (Mk. 16:1-2). Luke speaks of “**the women**” (plural; Lk. 23:55-24:2). It seems likely that there were at least four other women who accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb (cf. Lk. 24:10). We’ll see in a moment that John isn’t unaware of the other women (v. 2); but he’s telling us about events that are connected only with Mary Magdalene, and so for the sake of simplicity and clarity he mentions only Mary Magdalene. The first century historian selectively includes only the information necessary to that part of the story that he is telling.

“Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone taken away from the tomb.”¹

¹ John refers to “*the stone*” that was blocking the entrance to the tomb as if we know all about it. But he never mentioned this stone in his account of the burial (cf. Luke). Matthew tells us that after Jesus was laid in the tomb Joseph “rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away” (Mat. 27:60; cf. Mk. 15:46). Mark tells us that the women were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”

II. John 20:2 — So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid Him.”

Why does John name Simon Peter and so stubbornly refuse to name the other disciple? Because he *is* the other disciple and he desires only to be known as the disciple whom Jesus loved – despite all his own sin and imperfections. It’s this John, who was there that morning, who is recounting these events for us.

When Mary saw that the stone was taken away from the tomb, she immediately assumed that the enemies of Jesus had stolen away His body as the final indignity. No doubt, all the women jumped to this same conclusion together. They obviously weren’t aware of the guard that Matthew tells us the Jews had set (Mat. 27:62-66; 28:4). If they had been, they never would have come to the tomb in the first place with the purpose—as only Mark and Luke tell us—of anointing Jesus’ body (Mk. 16:5; Lk. 23:55-24:1). Matthew’s account of what happened at this point is an example of historical “compression”:

- Matthew 28:2–5a — And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid...”

We know from the other gospels that when the women arrived at the tomb, the guard had already left the tomb (cf. Mat. 28:11) and the angel was no longer sitting on the stone (Mk. 16:4-5; Lk. 24:1-4). Matthew doesn’t “contradict” these facts, but he does compress things so that his *account* of the angel’s words to the women follows immediately upon his *account* of the angel rolling back the stone and sitting on it and the guards becoming like dead men. This variety in the Gospels only testifies even more powerfully to the resurrection as a historically verifiable fact. And how does Matthew know what happened at the tomb before the women arrived? We assume the eyewitness testimony of the guard. Should we be surprised if one or more of the guard joined the early Christian community after what was witnessed at the tomb?

John is telling the story of Mary Magdalene, and not the story of the other women who were with her. While Mary immediately runs away to get help, we know from the other Gospels that the rest of the women stayed at the tomb. None of the other Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene left prematurely because this is irrelevant to their account and would only have been a distraction. What they do tell us is what John doesn’t tell us. The rest of the women entered the tomb and found it empty (Mk. 16:5; Lk. 24:3). But “while they were perplexed about this [probably because of how they found the linen wrappings and head cloth; cf. John 20:6-7], behold, *two men* suddenly *stood* near them in dazzling clothing” (Lk. 24:4). Mark says that “they saw *a* young man *sitting* on the right side, wearing a white robe” (Mk. 16:5). Is this a contradiction, or is this further evidence of the genuineness of these independent historical accounts? Were the angels both initially sitting as they will be later when Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb (Jn. 20:11-

(Mk. 16:3). John simply assumes his readers’ knowledge of the stone and says that when Mary came early to the tomb, she found the stone taken away.

12)? Did they then stand up together while one of them addressed the women?² The angel who addresses the women would then be the “young man” (or angel) mentioned in Mark. Far from causing any doubts, these differences between Mark and Luke highlight the historical veracity of the empty tomb and the angelic visitation.

Matthew tells us that the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid... go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him” (Mat. 28:5, 7; cf. Mk. 16:6-7; Lk. 24:5-7). Then the women “left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples” (Mat. 28:8; cf. Lk. 24:9). But Mark says that “they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment were gripping them; *and they said nothing to anyone*, for they were afraid” (Mk. 16:8). I believe what Mark is telling us is that the women were initially unable to say anything to anyone because fear at this angelic visitation had effectively tied their tongues even in the midst of their joy.³ Notice how Mark says nothing about joy and emphasizes only the fear (“fled... trembling... astonishment... gripping... said nothing to anyone... afraid”). Mark is emphasizing the reality that “the account of the empty tomb is soul-shaking... Those who are confronted with God’s direct intervention in [history] do not know how to react... there are no categories available to men which enable them to understand and respond appropriately. The first human response is overwhelming fear” (Lane). This explains why, in Matthew, we’re told that Jesus Himself met the women at some later point (probably after they had arrived at home), and repeated to the women essentially verbatim what the angels’ had already told them (cf. Calvin):

- Matthew 28:9–10 (see vv. 5, 7) — Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “*Do not be afraid; go and report to My brothers to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.*”

Jesus isn’t denying that He will also come to the disciples on that very day (Jn. 20:19; Lk. 24:36; cf. Jn. 20:26). Matthew is the only one who recounts these specific words of the angels and of Jesus because Matthew is the only one who tells us how Jesus met with the disciples in Galilee when He gave them the commission to make disciples of all the nations (Mat. 28:16-20).⁴ Once again, far from causing doubt, the differences in the Gospel accounts bear further witness to their historical reliability.

So now let’s go back to Mary Magdalene. We know that she wasn’t there when the angel appeared to the other women (and she won’t be there when Jesus appears to them). When she saw the stone taken away from the tomb “she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid Him.’”

² Luke’s “two men *suddenly stood* near them” would then be a dramatic device as well as another example of compression.

³ Mark could mean that the women said nothing to anyone *except* the eleven and all the rest of the disciples (cf. Acts 1:15),” but this seems unlikely. Mark emphasizes the fear and trembling of the women because of His unique theological agenda (see Lane, NICNT).

⁴ Cf. the literary/theological structure of Matthew [Galilee—Judea—Galilee].

III. John 20:3–4 — So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. Now the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first;

Did Peter and John meet the women as they were coming back from the tomb? If they did, the women would still have been speechless with fear and trembling.⁵ More likely, the women had already reached home by the time Mary had come to both Peter *and* John and given them her news,⁶ and by the time Peter and John set out for the tomb.⁷

Where is Mary while Peter and John are running to the tomb? Maybe she's resting and getting her breath before she sets out again. In any case, she's probably not as fast of a runner and may also be slowed down by a woman's clothes. Obviously, she can't run back to the tomb as fast as she came. John doesn't give us the details. In a moment, he'll simply reintroduce Mary as being present again at the tomb (v. 11).

The details that John does give us, however, are vivid. “So Peter and the other disciple **went forth** [from the house], and they **were going** to the tomb. Now the two **were running** together; and the other disciple **ran ahead** faster than Peter and **came to the tomb** first.”

IV. John 20:5 — ...and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in.

John paints the scene so simply and so vividly that we really do feel like we're there with him. We see John stooping and looking into the tomb and then we *see* what he tells us that he saw: “the linen wrappings lying there.” We don't know exactly how the tomb was set up, but one likely option is that there was a recessed burial bench in the wall with burial vaults underneath [see page 8].

John saw the linen wrappings lying “there” on the bench where the body of Jesus had been laid, but now the body of Jesus is no longer in the wrappings — only the graveclothes remain. But if the body of Jesus had been stolen away by enemies—or even removed by friends—the grave clothes would not have been left behind. And even if they had been left behind, they would have been cut or torn or unwound and cast aside. But what did John see as he looked in from outside? He saw “the linen wrappings lying there” where they should be, and that was all. For whatever reason—probably a combination of fear and wonder and confusion—John tells us that he stayed outside, waiting for Peter.

V. John 20:6–7 — And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but folded up in a place by itself.

⁵ If the longer ending of Mark is authentic (or preserves an authentic tradition), then Jesus appeared *first* to Mary Magdalene before any of the other women (Mk. 16:9). Also, it seems that the women found the courage to report to the disciples only when Mary Magdalene had also returned the second time from the tomb (Lk. 24:10).

⁶ “She came *to* Simon Peter *and* [she came] *to* the other disciple.”

⁷ Why wouldn't the women have also met Mary Magdalene as she was returning a second time to the tomb (Jn. 20:11)? Unless, perhaps, Mary did not return immediately?

We can imagine John telling Peter what he's seen as Peter runs up. Luke tells us that Peter also stooped and looked into the tomb (Lk. 24:12). And then he went in while John still held back. And what did Peter see? He saw not just the linen wrappings lying there, but also the face-cloth not lying with the linen wrappings, but folded up (or rolled up) and set aside in a place by itself. Here, again, are the unadorned, unexaggerated, even understated recollections of an eyewitness — of one who was there. Obviously, someone has been in the tomb, and no enemy of Jesus! Who, then?

What would you have concluded if you were Peter or John? The body of Jesus is no longer there. That's a simple, incontrovertible fact. And yet the wrappings are still there, intact. All the evidence tells you that His body has not been removed by His enemies *or* by His friends.⁸ All the evidence tells you that the emptiness of the tomb is something not only mysterious but something unspeakably wonderful. Would you be remembering now how Jesus told you that He would rise from the dead (Mat. 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 26:32)? Would you be remembering these words that Jesus spoke to you just three days earlier on the night before He died?

- **John 16:16, 20** — “A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me ... Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will cry and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.”

Whatever John may have been remembering, he tells us in verse eight:

VI. John 20:8 — So the other disciple [that's John] who had first come to the tomb then also entered, *and he saw and believed*.

What did John believe? He believed, deep down, that the only explanation for what he was seeing with his own eyes was the resurrection of Jesus.

But therein lies still the fundamental inadequacy of his faith. He “saw and believed.” He believes that a resurrection must have happened because of the evidence in front of him and perhaps because of words He remembers Jesus speaking. But he cannot yet understand *why* it has happened. “He *saw* and believed,” and then John explains:

VII. John 20:9 — For as yet they did not understand the *Scripture*, that He *must* rise again from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus isn't just an astonishing historical fact – though if we've seen anything at all this morning, we've seen that it is that. The resurrection didn't happen in a void — without context. Not only were there specific Old Testament Scriptures pointing to the resurrection (Ps. 16:7-11; Isa. 53:10-12), but the entire redemptive message of the Old Testament required a Messiah who would die and be buried and be raised up from the dead (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-47; 1 Cor. 15:3-4). The historically verifiable fact of the empty tomb and of the resurrection of Jesus was decreed by God, foretold by the prophets, foreshadowed in the types, and even required by the very nature of that salvation which the Old Testament reveals that we need. But neither John

⁸ In addition to the fact of the graveclothes that have been left behind, this would be intrinsically unlikely given the fact of “friendship” and also given the intervening Sabbath.

nor Peter can see this yet. All they can see is the evidence before their eyes, and on that basis—and on that basis alone—John believed.⁹ The simple reality is that even apart from any kind of saving faith, those who have been confronted with the combined testimony of the Gospels, with multiple corroborating eyewitness accounts, are foolish not to believe in the resurrection of Jesus as a historically demonstrable fact. John saw and believed. And now we, too, believe on the basis of the eyewitness testimony preserved for us in the Gospels.

But believing because of eyewitness testimony isn't enough. In John's case, believing because of what he saw wasn't enough. In John's case, this believing—combined with the fact that he still has not seen Jesus alive—won't lend itself to the kind of confidence that announces the good news to others (Jn. 20:10) because he still doesn't fully comprehend what the good news is. In verse 10, John says simply: "So the disciples went away again to where they were staying."

John believes because of what he's seen, but not yet because he understands. We believe not simply because of the physical and historical evidence and the unimpeachable eyewitness testimony. We believe because our minds have been opened to understand the Scripture—that Jesus must rise from the dead. It is this wonderful, glorious "must" that is the bedrock foundation for our faith – a faith through which Peter says we are even now being protected by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:5). It is this wonderful, glorious "must" that takes the "sheer facticity" of the resurrection and reveals in that fact of history the joyful news of our salvation. Therefore, we are able to confess with joy—with the bedrock certainty of faith: "We believe in the resurrection."

⁹ John doesn't tell us whether Peter did or didn't believe (cf. Lk. 24:12).

