

John 20:1-9 (Part II)
We Believe in the Resurrection

Introduction

In many “churches” and mainline denominations today, the resurrection of Jesus is purely a theological or spiritual reality. In other words, Jesus was not really raised physically and bodily on the third day. The Gospel accounts of the resurrection are only communicating in “mythic historical language” the true theological and spiritual realities of Christ’s victory over sin and over suffering and His attainment of a spiritual life for us after death. To put it more simply, the resurrection is an invented story that nevertheless communicates something that is very true.

Why are these “churches” so intent on denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus? One reason is because then they don’t have to be embarrassed of all the “contradictions” (they don’t have to defend the “old-fashioned” idea of biblical inerrancy). They would say that the contradictions aren’t really contradictions (or at least not ones they need to be concerned about) because the “history” that’s being written is not literal history, but was actually created by the early church to embody its faith and so also to be a vehicle for communicating that faith. The world says: “Because the gospel writers had a theological agenda (it’s not just a neutral, unbiased presentation of bare historical facts), therefore their history is not to be trusted—and therefore, in turn, neither is their theology to be trusted.” The apostate church says: “The gospel writers never intended their history to be read as literal history, therefore their theology can be trusted.” But, in fact, it’s the real history from which the theology of the gospel writers is derived.

It should be clear to us who have had our minds opened to understand the Scriptures that the “churches” who are reading the Gospels in this way are reading them all wrong. They’re not reading them according to the stated intentions and goals of the Gospel writers themselves, and neither are they reading them with a true understanding of what the Bible teaches about creation and the fall and sin and God’s holiness. Without a “real” and “literal” history, the spiritual teachings that are supposedly being communicated via this pseudo-history can have no real existence—no reason for being (no *raison d’etre*).

While we reject the teachings of these apostate churches as heretical, at the same time we may not always appreciate the extent to which our faith is dependent upon the physical evidence and the testimony of those who witnessed history happening. The Christian faith is rooted in a record of historically verifiable events, and preeminently in the Gospel records of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It should be significant to us that in the Gospels—and in all the Bible—there is no other single historical event that is more carefully and thoroughly documented by physical evidence and eyewitness testimony than is the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Saving faith is only possible when we understand the “must” of the resurrection (cf. Jn. 20:8-9). But this saving faith always presupposes that there is evidence to believe that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened. When we minimize this reality, we can lose sight of the “sheer historical facticity” of the bodily resurrection of our Lord. It’s when we minimize this reality that we lose some of the wonderful joy of our salvation, and especially of the resurrection hope that we all have. This is why I’ve taken last week and this week to focus on the historical record of the resurrection as it’s come down to us in the Gospels. I want us who have already believed to

comprehend the historical facticity of the resurrection, and in comprehending this, to be all the more filled with hope. A secondary result of this is that we'll also be better equipped to confront the skepticism of an unbelieving world as well as the false doctrine of an unbelieving "church."

This morning, we're going to start out by looking at two more tensions (or apparent contradictions) between John and Luke and see how these differences show us what John and Luke were thinking—as well as how these differences testify even more powerfully to the truth of the historical record.

I. Who ran to the tomb?

Last week, we saw how Peter and John both ran to the tomb together after the report from Mary Magdalene that the enemies of Jesus had stolen away His body. John concludes:

- John 20:10 — So the disciples [Peter and John] went away again to where they were staying.

Luke, however, tells us only that Peter went to the tomb.

- Luke 24:12 — But Peter stood up and ran to the tomb; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen wrappings only. And he went away by himself [to his own place where he was staying; cf. Jn. 20:2a], wondering at what had happened.

Luke tells us *only that Peter* went to the tomb. Of course, he doesn't tell us *that only Peter* went to the tomb. Did Luke know that Peter wasn't alone, and that John was with him? Later, when Luke tells about Jesus' appearance to two disciples who were travelling from Jerusalem to a village named Emmaus, he records that the disciples said to Jesus (whom they still didn't recognize):

- Luke 24:22–24 — “But also some women among us astounded us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and not finding His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. *Some* [plural] of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also said...”

If Luke knew that John was with Peter, why does he tell us only that Peter went to the tomb? The simple answer is that Luke wants to draw our attention exclusively to the story of Peter. This is Luke's agenda. Peter's journey to the tomb must have been filled with a weight of guilt and remorse that John didn't carry. It was Peter, and not John, who denied Jesus three times on the night of His betrayal and then “went out and cried bitterly” (Lk. 22:54-62). In John's own Gospel, when he tells us that he was there with Peter, it's because he's giving us His own eyewitness testimony. When Luke tells us only about Peter running to the tomb, it's because he's continuing Peter's story – not John's story. The Peter who denied Jesus three times now runs to the tomb; and when he saw only the linen wrappings, “he went away by himself, wondering at what had happened.”

Luke is also the only gospel writer who tells us that on the day of His resurrection, and before He appeared to the rest of the disciples, Jesus appeared to Peter. When the two disciples who had

been on the road to Emmaus returned to Jerusalem with the news that they had seen Jesus, they were met with this news from the eleven,¹ and from those who were with them:

- Luke 24:34 (cf. v. 33; 1 Cor. 15:3-5²) — “The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon [Peter].”

At first, we’re inclined to go back in Luke and see if we missed the place where he told us this happened. But nowhere in Luke are we given any other hint as to exactly when or where this happened and especially as to what Jesus might have said to Peter. A veil is drawn over the details of this appearance to Peter (maybe Peter himself was unwilling to speak of the things that Jesus said to him). So why does Luke bother to include this detail almost “in passing”? (In all of the other resurrection appearances the words of Jesus and/or the response of those He appeared to is recorded.) The fact that Jesus appeared especially to Peter is evidence of His full restoration as an apostle of Jesus Christ after his denial of Jesus.

In John’s gospel (alone of all four gospels), we’ll see the restoration of Peter when Jesus comes to the disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and asks Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” and commissions him three times, “Tend My lambs... Shepherd My sheep... Tend My sheep...” (Jn. 21:15-17). In Mark, we glimpse the coming restoration of Peter when Mark (alone of all four gospels) tells us how the angel said to the women at the tomb:

- Mark 16:7 — “But go, tell His disciples *and Peter*, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.’”

In Luke (alone of all four Gospels) we see the restoration of Peter in the special resurrection appearance of Jesus to Peter—alone of the eleven disciples. This helps us to understand Luke’s exclusive focus on Peter as he ran to the tomb, and then went away by himself, wondering.

We see again how different parts of the history are independently related by each of the gospel writers — according to their own literary and theological agenda. And we see how each of these different parts of the history reinforces and supports all the others – bearing witness, in this way, to the sheer historical facticity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

II. When did Peter and John run to the tomb?

John tells us that Peter and John went to the tomb because of these words of Mary Magdalene: “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him” (Jn. 20:2-3). In other words, Peter and John went to the tomb *before* they heard from the women that angels had appeared to them and told them that Jesus was risen. Luke, however, recounts Peter’s visit to the tomb *after* the women (including Mary Magdalene) had announced to the disciples what they had heard from the angels. (And also after the women had told how Jesus Himself had appeared to them. But Luke hasn’t recorded this appearance of Jesus to the

¹ “The eleven” is a convenient collective designation for the original group of the disciples, minus Judas. It does not always mean that every single one of the eleven disciples is present (Lk. 24:33 [cf. Mk. 16:14] & Jn. 20:24).

² “The twelve” in 1 Cor. 15:5b is the traditional, collective designation for the original group of disciples and does not necessarily require that there were twelve actual men present (cf. Acts 1:12-26; Lk. 24:33 & Jn. 20:24).

women. Why? Because he’s “saving” Jesus’ first appearance [in his gospel] for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus [Lk. 24:13-35], a narrative which is then intimately joined with the appearance of Jesus to the eleven [Lk. 24:36-49]).

- Luke 24:9–12a — ...when [the women] returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the rest of the women with them were there; they were telling these things to the apostles. But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they were not believing them. But Peter stood up and ran to the tomb...

That Luke *recounts* Peter’s visit after he recounts the announcement of the women does not *necessarily* mean that Peter’s visit *took place* after the announcement of the women. Luke inserts this detail at this location because at a literary level, it fits here very nicely (and therefore frees him from having to add a lengthy parenthetical aside explaining how Mary Magdalene had left the tomb early, etc.). More importantly, Luke inserts this detail at this location because he wants to tell the story of Peter and what Peter saw, and yet given the nature of his Gospel narrative it would have been impossible for him to do this if he had to place things chronologically. According to the modern conventions of history textbooks, Luke contradicts John. But the first century reader who knew the actual chronological order of events would never have seen Luke “contradicting” John or in any way being deceptive or misleading. He would have understood that Luke was using a literary device whereby a historical event was recounted out of sequence (while being “embedded” very naturally in a new location) in order to add some relevant detail or to make some important point. In short, if the first century reader would not have seen Luke contradicting John or in any way being deceptive or misleading, then neither should we (contra: “chronological snobbery”). Luke’s “out of sequence” account is further evidence of the historical fact of Peter’s and John’s visit to the tomb and of what they saw there.

When Jesus appeared to the two disciples who were going to Emmaus, the two disciples related what had happened that morning in the same order that Luke did.

- Luke 24:22–24 — “But also some women among us astounded us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and not finding His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also said, but Him they did not see.”

Once again, there’s nothing in the wording here that requires that Peter’s and John’s visit to the tomb followed the report of the women that they had seen a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. It’s possible that Luke has reordered the originally chronological account of these two disciples in order to match his own recounting. There would be nothing wrong with this. It’s also possible that the two disciples *describe* first what they heard from the women as by far the most astonishing thing and then they *describe* how John and Peter had also (previously) gone to the tomb and how when they came back, their report agreed with what the women would say later. Once again, Luke doesn’t record any mention by the two disciples of the appearance of Jesus Himself to the women (Mat. 28:8-10) and to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18). But the disciples certainly wouldn’t have left out these details. That they were aware of Jesus’ appearance to the women is clearly implied when they say, “Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and

found it just exactly as the women also said, *but Him they did not see.*” We already know, however, why Luke purposely leaves these details out. He’s “saving” Jesus’ first resurrection appearance (in his gospel) for later.

And so we see over and over how each of the evangelists has ordered and edited the history of the resurrection according to his own literary method and at times according to his own unique theological emphases. And we also see how the independence of each of these histories (with all their apparent “contradictions”) only demonstrates all the more wonderfully the “sheer historical facticity” of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.³

III. What happened on Resurrection Sunday

I said earlier that it should be significant to us that in the Gospels—and in all the Bible—there is no other single historical event that is more carefully and thoroughly documented by physical evidence and eyewitness testimony than is the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There’s also no single day in biblical history that can be more thoroughly reconstructed than the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Remember, this cannot be found in any one Gospel, which simply means that this is evidence of a true and literal history. (For the most part, I’ll be relating the chronology without the theological agenda.)

In the darkness before dawn on the first day after the Sabbath—the first day of the week—there was an earthquake. An angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled away the stone and then sat down on it. The guards were terrified and fell to the ground as dead men.⁴ At some point, the angel was veiled again and when the guards had recovered their strength and courage, they looked in the tomb. Finding that the body was gone, they went back into the city to report to the chief priests.⁵

Meanwhile, just before dawn, at least four women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, and Mary the mother of James) set out for the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. By the time they arrived, the sun had risen.⁶ When they saw the stone taken away from the tomb, they assumed that the enemies of Jesus had taken away His body. Mary Magdalene ran to get help,⁷ but the other women stayed and even dared to go into the tomb.⁸ Suddenly, they saw two angels sitting where

³ Another possibility is that Peter made two separate trips to the tomb—the first trip with John after the report from Mary Magdalene, and the second trip with some other unnamed disciples after the report from all of the women. Luke may be describing this second trip (see the chronology below). If so, Luke “treats” it as Peter’s first trip (using much of the same language we see in John), since in this case the first trip has not been recounted. It is also possible that Peter made two trips to the tomb, but that Luke still describes the first trip. The commentaries that I consulted all assume that Luke and John are both describing the same trip to the tomb (Nolland, WBC; Stein, NAC; Liefeld, EBC; Marshall, NIGTC; Bock, ECNT; Lenski; Lange; Calvin; Bock says, “The almost total agreement between Luke and John suggests the use of a similar source”).

⁴ Mat. 28:1-4

⁵ Mat. 28:11-15

⁶ Mat. 28:1; Mk. 16:1-2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1

⁷ Jn. 20:1-2

⁸ Mk. 16:3-5a; Lk. 24:2-3; cf. Mat. 28:6 (Matthew’s “Come, see the place where He was lying” may have originally been [or had the sense of] “Come closer, observe the place where He was lying.” Certainly, the angel’s words as Matthew recounts them fit well with the picture [resulting from Matthew’s historical “compression”] of the angel sitting on the stone outside the tomb and speaking these words to the women.

the body of Jesus had been. The angels stood up and the one on the right spoke to the women telling them not to be afraid, but to go and bring word to the disciples that Jesus was risen.⁹ The women were filled with joy, but also with fear. They fled from the tomb in terrified astonishment, unable to say anything to anyone.¹⁰

While these things were happening, Mary found first Peter, and then John, and told them that the enemies of Jesus had stolen away His body. Peter and John then set out to go to the tomb together. (It seems unlikely that they encountered the women returning from the tomb.) Both Peter and John were running, but John outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first. Mary, perhaps after collecting her strength, followed more slowly. When John arrived at the tomb, he stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there (the angels were veiled again.) When Peter caught up with John, he also stooped and looked into the tomb, and then he went in. He saw not only the linen wrappings lying there, but also the facecloth folded up in a place by itself. Then John also entered, and he saw, and believed deep down that the only explanation for the empty tomb must be the resurrection of Jesus. But he still couldn't understand what it meant. John and Peter both returned, then, to where they were staying. Peter went back to his own place, wondering at what had happened.¹¹

In the meantime, Mary Magdalene arrived back at the tomb. (If she encountered John and/or Peter, they apparently didn't say anything to her about what they had concluded from the linen wrappings.) When Mary stooped to look into the tomb she saw two angels, one sitting at the head and one sitting at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. The angels asked her why she was crying. Then Mary turned around and saw a man standing there. At first she didn't know it was Jesus, but then Jesus made Himself known to her and gave her a message to take back to the disciples. Mary immediately went to find the disciples to tell them that she had seen the Lord and what He had said to her.¹²

While Mary was going to find the disciples, Jesus appeared to the women who had returned from the tomb and who were still trembling with fear, unable to say anything to anyone. Jesus repeated the message of the angels, telling the women not to be afraid, but to go and bring the news of His resurrection to the disciples.¹³

After two angelic visitations and messages, Jesus Himself has appeared at separate times to Mary Magdalene and also to the other Mary, and Salome, and Joanna. Probably it was the news of Mary Magdalene and the other women that caused the disciples to be all gathered together again¹⁴ (after they had all been scattered like sheep without a shepherd).¹⁵ Peter and John would have been able to confirm the empty tomb, but they would not have been able to confirm the angelic visitations or the appearances of Jesus. Perhaps deep down they believed the reports of the women, but since they still couldn't give their own eyewitness testimony and since they still

⁹ Lk. 24:4-7; Mk. 16:5-7; cf. Mat. 28:5-7

¹⁰ Mat. 28:8a; Mk. 16:8

¹¹ Jn. 20:2-10; cf. Lk. 24:12, 24

¹² Jn. 20:11-18; cf. Mk. 16:9

¹³ Mat. 28:8-10

¹⁴ Mat. 28:8, 11; Lk. 24:10, 22-23; Jn. 20:18; cf. Mk. 16:10

¹⁵ Mat. 26:31

couldn't understand what a resurrection would *mean*, they were reserved.¹⁶ In any case, the women's words appeared to the rest of the disciples as nonsense, and they didn't believe them.¹⁷ Perhaps they thought that the women were so emotionally distressed that they were imagining things or even that someone was playing a cruel trick on them.

After a time (it's probably now late morning), at least some of the disciples dispersed again. Peter went off by himself. Did he return to the tomb or did he find some other place to be alone? Wherever it was that Peter went, Jesus appeared to him there. And after whatever it was that passed between them, Peter returned to the disciples with the news that he, too, had now seen the risen Lord. With Peter's independent confirmation of the independent reports of Mary Magdalene and of the other women, the rest of the disciples finally believed—at least in a theoretical sense—that Jesus must be risen from the dead, whatever that might mean.¹⁸

Meanwhile, two of the disciples (not of the eleven), who had been present in the morning for the reports of Mary Magdalene and the other women, were not there to hear Peter's report. Cleopas and his companion had left the gathering of the disciples (perhaps around the same time that Peter did [early afternoon?]) and set out for the village of Emmaus (which was seven miles from Jerusalem). While they were on the way, Jesus came to them and was walking and speaking with them. They only recognized Jesus after they had arrived in Emmaus, and then they immediately set out to return to Jerusalem with the news that they, too, had seen the Lord. When they arrived again that evening, they found all the disciples gathered together and were greeted with the news that Jesus had really risen and had appeared to Peter. And then they, in turn, related to the rest of the disciples their own experience on the road and how they had finally recognized Jesus when He broke bread with them."¹⁹

There were now four independent testimonies of someone seeing the risen Jesus: The testimony of Mary Magdalene, the testimony of the other Mary and Salome and Joanna, the testimony of Peter, and the testimony of Cleopas and his companion. It was only then—after these four prior appearances—and while all the disciples were now gathered together discussing these things, that Jesus came and stood in their midst. Even then, the disciples thought at first that they were seeing a spirit. After gently rebuking them, Jesus showed them His hands and His feet to prove that He had both flesh and bones. Even then, the disciples still were not believing because of their joy and astonishment. So Jesus asked for a piece of broiled fish and ate it before them. Then Jesus spoke to them even as He had to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and opened their minds to understand from the Scriptures that He *must* rise from the dead and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations.²⁰

Conclusion

Why did Jesus make four separate appearances before He appeared to all the disciples all together? One reason must certainly be so that there would be no question that this was some

¹⁶ Cf. Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:10

¹⁷ Lk. 24:11; cf. Mk. 16:11

¹⁸ Lk. 24:33-34; 1 Cor. 15:4-5; cf. Lk. 24:37-39 [Mk. 16:12-13]

¹⁹ Lk. 24:13-35; cf. Mk. 16:12-13

²⁰ Lk. 24:36-49; Jn. 20:19-23; cf. Mk. 16:14

“mass hallucination.” The whole sequence of events on that first day of the week, as we’ve pieced it together from the four Gospel accounts, including all the various emotions and responses of the disciples, is powerful testimony—in fact, it proves far beyond all reasonable doubt—the “sheer historical facticity” of the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, saving faith is only possible when we understand the “must” of the resurrection (cf. Jn. 20:8-9), but this saving faith always presupposes that there is evidence to believe that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened.

This morning, then, let us rejoice with an unquenchable joy that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened. And then let us desire with all our hearts to serve and to obey this Jesus who is risen from the dead (history) and with whom we have now been united by faith (theology). Finally, may we be all the more equipped to confront with boldness and with joy the false teaching of an unbelieving “church” as well as the skepticism and mockery of an unbelieving world.