

The Resurrection of Jesus

The Bible contains four accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. They can be found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you read each of those accounts separately then you'll probably find them easy to understand. However, if you compare them with one another things will become complicated very quickly. It's actually tricky to reconcile every detail of all four resurrection accounts – which may be surprising if you've never studied this before.

I believe this is comforting because it means we have four different eyewitness accounts of what happened that day (instead of just one account that's repeated four times). However, it does make it difficult if you want to get a complete picture of what happened on the day the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

What follows is my understanding of the resurrection of Jesus and His appearances after He rose from the dead, along with some commentary about why I assembled the pieces in this order. If you'd like to check my work you can read the accounts for yourself in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 21.

The stone is rolled away

The first thing that happened on the resurrection morning was this:

Matthew 28:2-4 “And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.”

Before dawn on resurrection Sunday an angel descended from Heaven and rolled away the stone. The angel did *not* raise Jesus from the dead, nor did he let Jesus out of the tomb. Instead he rolled away the stone so everyone could see that the tomb was already empty!

The appearance of the angel terrified the men who were guarding the tomb, and they collapsed onto the ground as if they were dead. These guards fled from the tomb and went to tell the chief priests what had happened.

As far as we know the only people who saw the angel roll away the stone were the guards. By the time other visitors arrived the guards were long gone and the stone had already been rolled away. (Matthew does list this event first in his account, but that's to provide backstory about why the stone was already rolled away when the women arrived.)

The women visit the tomb

Early that Sunday morning, while it was still dark, a group of women traveled from Bethany to the tomb of Jesus (which was a distance of about two miles). By the time they reached the tomb the sun had begun to rise. To their surprise the women discovered that stone had already been rolled away and the guards were gone:

Matthew 28:1: “In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.”

John 20:1: “The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

Mark 16:1-4: “And when the sabbath was past,

Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.”

Luke 24:1-2: “Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre.”

John tells us that the women began their trip while it was still dark. The other gospels tell us they arrived when it had just begun to dawn. Since they had to walk a couple miles to reach the tomb this makes sense. Mark gives us a list of which women made the trip: there was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke 24:10 tells us that Joanna was there as well.

While the women were making the journey to the tomb they wondered who would roll the stone away for them. When they arrived they saw that the stone was already rolled away. This means they must not have witnessed the stone being moved, which also means they weren't there to witness the angel moving it! There's also no mention of encountering any guards, which is more evidence the stone was rolled away before they arrived. Luke is very clear that they “found the stone rolled away”.

Mary Magdalane runs to tell Peter

At this point (and this is very important!) the party splits into two groups. When Mary Magdalane saw that the stone had been rolled away she immediately jumped to the conclusion that someone had stolen the body of Christ. She immediately left the other women behind and ran to where Peter and John were staying and told them what happened:

John 20:2: “Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.”

While Mary Magdalene made the trip to find Peter and John to tell them the news, the other women were still at the tomb – and they encountered some visitors.

The angels bring news

Back at the tomb, an angel appeared and told the remaining women that Jesus had risen from the dead. The women were commanded to go to the disciples and tell them what happened:

Matthew 28:5-7: “And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.”

After the angel told the women the good news they then

entered into the tomb (which was exactly what the angel commanded them to do – “Come, see the place where the Lord lay”). Inside they found two men who gave them the same news:

Mark 16:5-7: “And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.”

Luke 24:3-7: “And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.”

Mark and Luke are talking about the same event. There were two men present, but only one of them actually spoke and that's what Mark records. (It seems that the two men were originally standing, but one of them sat down at some point.) Since the Bible tells us these two beings were *men* and not angels it's possible they're the same two people who appeared with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration (Moses and Elijah). However, they're not identified by name so it's not clear who they were.

Some of the women received this news with joy and others were terrified. The women who were terrified fled from the tomb and didn't tell anyone:

Mark 16:8: “And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.”

However, not all of the women were frightened. Some of them went and told the disciples, but we will get to that in a minute.

Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John

While the other women were talking to the angel at the tomb, Mary Magdalene brought the news to Peter and John. The women at the tomb left the area and were gone by the time Peter and John arrived to see what was going on. The two disciples found an empty tomb with no women or angels present:

John 20:3-10: “Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must

rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again unto their own home."

Luke 24:12: "Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass."

At this point no one had seen Jesus risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene wasn't there when the angels told the other women what happened so she still didn't know what was going on. All Mary knew was that the body was gone. Peter had no idea what happened. John did believe, but *no one went to tell the other disciples what they saw*. Instead Peter and John returned home and Mary Magdalene remained behind at the tomb. That was when she looked inside and saw something that the two disciples didn't see. Two angels appeared in the tomb after Peter and John left:

John 20:11-13: "But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping; and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him."

These angels didn't tell Mary what was going on. Instead she turned around and became the first person to see the resurrected Jesus:

John 20:14-18: "And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing,

and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.”

Mary was still looking for the body of Jesus. She didn't recognize Jesus until He called her by name – and then she knew who He was.

Jesus said something intriguing in verse 17. He commands Mary to not touch Him because He hadn't yet ascended to God. However, when He met Thomas later He told him to touch His hands and His side. That makes me wonder if perhaps Jesus made a trip to Heaven during the 40 days before His ascension. The Bible tells us He only made a few appearances during those 40 days, which raises the question concerning where Jesus was the rest of the time.

After Mary saw her risen Lord she went to tell the other disciples what she had seen.

The women tell the disciples

While Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene were on their way to the tomb to see what was going on, the women who weren't terrified by the angels ran and told the remaining disciples (who

were apparently staying at a different place from Peter and John) what the angel told them. On the way there they become the second people to meet the risen Lord:

Matthew 28:8-10: “And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word. And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.”

Not only had the women been told by an angel that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they had seen the risen Lord as well! This is the second time the women were told that the disciples should go to Galilee because they would see Jesus there (the other time was Mark 16:7). They brought this news to the other disciples (except for Peter and John, who were at home and so weren't with the others) but no one believed them:

Luke 24:8-11: “And they remembered his words, And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles. And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.”

One important fact to keep in mind is that the group of disciples were known as “the eleven” even when everyone wasn't present. (We'll see this later on when Jesus appears to “the eleven” even though Thomas isn't present.) Mary Magdalene also came and told them what she had seen but they didn't believe her

either:

Mark 16:9-11: “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not.”

The disciples had now been told by two different groups of women that the Lord Jesus had arisen from the dead. Even though the women told them that they had seen Him alive, the disciples didn't believe their account. The disciples were told to go to Galilee because they would see the risen Lord there, but it seems they didn't believe this and didn't obey. (Jesus will rebuke them for this later.)

The guards

While all of this was going on the guards went to the chief priests and told them what happened:

Matthew 28:11-15: “Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews

until this day.”

The priests were told exactly what happened, but instead of believing it they bribed the guards to spread a lie. The lie the guards told was quite preposterous: they expected people to believe that all of them fell asleep on watch at the same time (even though that was punishable by death in those days), and while they were sleeping 11 men came to the tomb, moved a giant stone without waking anyone up, took a dead body out of the tomb, and then ran away in the dead of night.

The guards knew this story wasn't true but they wanted the money so they accepted the bribe. The priests also knew it wasn't true but it was apparently the only lie they could think up on short notice. It's a sad thing that the priests were told the truth about the resurrection and still chose to reject it. They decided to believe a lie that they liked instead of a truth that they hated.

The road to Emmaus

The next appearance of Jesus was to two men who were walking along the road to Emmaus:

Mark 16:12-13 “After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them.”

Mark only records a very statement of this encounter. The main point he brings out is that yet another group of people saw the risen Lord and told the disciples about it, and the disciples still refused to believe in the resurrection. Luke goes into much greater detail:

Luke 24:13-35 “And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which

was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad? And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days? And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done. Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre; And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive. And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not. Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. And

they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread."

It seems that Cleopas and another unnamed man were told that Jesus had risen from the dead. Even though they knew about the empty tomb they still didn't believe. It wasn't until they saw the risen Lord for themselves that they finally believed. They rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what they had seen, but Mark tells us the disciples still didn't believe in the resurrection.

One consistent fact we've seen in these accounts is that the disciples were *extremely* unwilling to believe that Jesus had rose from the dead. Even when one person after another came forward with eyewitness sightings of the risen Lord (by people they knew and trusted), they *still* refused to believe. The disciples simply wouldn't believe until they saw Him for themselves. (It wasn't just Thomas who doubted!)

Verse 34 tells us that at some point in the day Jesus appeared to Peter. (My guess is this happened after He appeared

to the women but before He spent the afternoon with Cleopas on the road to Emmaus.) However, even with all that testimony the disciples *still* weren't convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus appears to the eleven

While Cleopas was giving his account of meeting Jesus, the Lord appeared in their midst and rebuked them for their unbelief:

Mark 16:14: “Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.”

Notice that Jesus was said to have appeared to “the eleven”, even though Thomas wasn't present! This is what I was getting at earlier: the group was known as “the eleven” even if a few members were missing at the time. If this seems strange, think of it like a sports team. People still refer to a football team by its given name even if a few of the players are absent. The fact that not everyone is there doesn't change the team's name.

Luke and John go into much more detail about this appearance. At first the disciples believed they were seeing a ghost, but Jesus proved that He physically rose from the dead:

Luke 24:36-49: “And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit

hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

John 20:19-21 “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”

Jesus made it clear to His disciples that it really was Him.

He wasn't a ghost or a spirit, but had risen bodily from the dead! He even ate food in their presence, which is something disembodied spirits weren't capable of doing. Only after seeing the Lord Jesus in person and watching Him eat did the disciples finally believe that He really *had* risen from the dead.

Appearance to Thomas

Thomas, however, wasn't present. Just like the rest of the disciples, he refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until He appeared to him in person:

John 20:24-29: “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”

Once Jesus appeared to Thomas he believed as well – but it took an actual appearance by the risen Lord to get him to believe.

The Fishing Trip

The next time Jesus appeared to His disciples was when a group of them went fishing. We can find the account in John:

John 21:1-14 “After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have

now caught. Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.”

This was the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples. The first time was on the evening of the resurrection day when He made His first appearance to the group and rebuked them for their unbelief. The second time was when He showed Himself to the group when Thomas was present. This was the third appearance.

Appearing to the 500

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that Jesus appeared to a group of more than 500 people:

1 Corinthians 15:3-8: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he

was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.”

Paul gives us a nice outline of the appearances of Christ, although it's not complete. He doesn't mention the fact that Mary Magdalene saw Him first, or that He was then seen by a different group of women. Paul also doesn't mention the sighting on the road to Emmaus. He mentions the fact that the disciples saw Jesus but they actually saw Him three times, not just once.

The apostle Paul does provide some new information here. At some point after Jesus' appearance to the disciples, but before His ascension, He was seen by more than 500 people at once. We don't have any additional information about this but it does mean there were a lot of people who saw the risen Lord!

After that appearance He was seen by James. I suspect this is the same person who wrote the book of James, who was also the half-brother of Christ. Perhaps that's when James started believing in Jesus. Before then the Bible tells us that Christ's family opposed His ministry and thought He was crazy (see Mark 3:21, 31-32).

Once Jesus appeared to James we're told that He appeared to the apostles. It's not clear how this is different from appearing to the disciples and yet it's listed separately. The final appearance was made to Paul and it didn't happen until after the ascension – which is possibly why Paul said he was born “out of due time”.

Ascension

The final appearance of Jesus (with the exception of His later appearance to the apostle Paul) was at His ascension:

Luke 24:50-51: “And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.”

Acts 1:4-11: “And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

The ascension of Jesus took place at Bethany. Jesus blessed His disciples and commanded them to spread the gospel throughout the world, and then slowly ascended up into Heaven. Apparently the disciples thought that Jesus was going to come back down because two men were sent to tell the disciples to disperse. The Bible doesn't tell us who these two men were but it's possible they're the same two men the women encountered inside the empty tomb.

The risen Jesus ascended to Heaven – but we were given the promise that one day He will return in the same way He departed! That day has not yet come but it's drawing ever closer. We know it will happen because God always keeps His promises.