

Harmonizing the accounts of the Resurrection

A rough sequence within the parallel accounts

Matthew 27:62-28:1;
Mark 16:1-3 // Luke 24:1;
Matthew 28:2-4;
John 20:1-10;
Matthew 28:5-8 // Mark 16:4-8 // Luke 24:2-8;
Mark 16:9 // John 20:11-18;
Matthew 28:9-15;
Luke 24:13-35;
Luke 24:36-43 // John 20:19-31.

The presumed sequence of events

0. [Saturday—guards seal the stone and set up a watch (Matthew 27:62-66).]
1. Jesus rises from the dead.¹
2. Early Sunday morning the women set out for the tomb—Magdalene (John 20:1); Magdalene and Mary (Matthew 28:1); Magdalene, Mary and Salome (Mark 16:1-2); Magdalene, Mary, Joanna and others (Luke 23:55-24:1, 10).²
3. On the way they worry about the stone (Mark 16:3).
4. Before they arrive an angel rolls back the stone, complete with earthquake, etc. (Matthew 28:2-4).³
5. They arrive and see that the stone has been rolled back, but the angel was no longer visible outside (Mark 16:4, Luke 24:2, John 20:1).⁴
6. Magdalene takes off immediately to tell Peter—Peter and John run to the tomb to see (John 20:2-3).⁵
7. Before Peter and John get there the other women enter the tomb, and see and hear the angels (Luke 24:3-8, Mark 16:5-7, Matthew 28:5-7).⁶
8. They leave the tomb in fear, saying nothing to the guards or anyone they chance to meet (Mark 16:8, Matthew 28:8a).
9. Probably right after the women leave, and before Peter and John arrive, the guards take off (Matthew 28:11-15).
10. Peter and John come and go [to their own homes] (John 20:4-10; cf. Luke 24:12 that is an historical aside).⁷ No mention is made of either angels or guards, so presumably Peter and John saw no one—the place appeared to be abandoned.

¹ None of the Evangelists mentions the moment of the resurrection; probably because that information was never revealed. The fact is taken for granted (the “firstborn from the dead”—Col. 1:18, Rev. 1:5; the “firstfruits”—1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

² The several accounts say it was very early, as the day began to dawn, while it was still dark, but by the time they got to the tomb the sun had risen. There is no discrepancy: recall that the garden is on the west side of a mountain, so even after the sun had risen the tomb would be in shadow, besides the shade of the trees. It was still darkish when they started out, but away from the mountain it was already day by the time they arrived—the tomb area would still be gloomy.

³ The removal of the stone was not to let Jesus out; it was to let witnesses in! If we only had Matthew’s record, we could assume that the women saw the shining angel outside the sepulcher, but a comparison of the other accounts leads to a different understanding. So how do we know those details? Matthew 28:11 says that “some” of the guard reported to the priests and accepted big money to spread a false report, but what happened to the other guards? I have no doubt that some of those guards were soundly converted and gave an eyewitness account to the Christian community.

⁴ If the angel had been visible, Magdalene would not have taken off, because she would not have thought that the body had been stolen. The hypothesis that she came once alone, before the others, is highly improbable (see next note).

⁵ Her use of the plural “we”, verse 2, indicates that she was not alone at the tomb.

⁶ I take Matthew and Mark to be parallel, describing the same event: the angel who rolled away the stone is now inside the sepulcher, sitting on the right side; he has turned off his neon and appears to be a young man clothed in white; each account furnishes a few distinct details in the angel’s speech—Mark includes “and Peter” [was Peter looking over his shoulder?]. The women were not sure they were happy with the situation, and the ‘young man’ may well have said more than Matthew and Mark record. I take it that Luke records a second inning: the women are having trouble assimilating the missing body (they were loaded with spices to put on that body—was their effort to be wasted?); so the angel calls in a colleague and they both turn on their neon—a little shock treatment; then they appeal to Jesus’ own words, which the women remember, and with that they are convinced and go their way.

⁷ Verse 8 says that John (the author) “saw and believed”. What did John ‘see’ that made him ‘believe’? He saw the linen strips ‘lying’, that is, in the form of the body, only there was no body inside them! If someone had stolen the body, as Magdalene supposed, they would have taken the wrapped package (much easier to carry) and there would have been no linen strips. If someone had unwrapped the body, for whatever reason, there would have been a sizable mound of linen strips and spices piled up (how much cloth would it take to wrap up a hundred pounds of spices?). No, Jesus simply passed through the cloth, as He would later pass through the wall of the upper room, leaving the package like a mummy case or empty cocoon. When John saw that he understood that the only possible explanation was resurrection.

11. Magdalene returns to the sepulcher but doesn't get there until everyone is gone (that's why she thought Jesus was the gardener); Jesus appears to her first (Mark 16:9, John 20:11-17).⁸
12. Then Jesus appears to the other women and they go on their way to tell the disciples (Matthew 28:9-10, Luke 24:9-11).⁹
13. Magdalene goes and tells the disciples (Mark 16:10-11, John 20:18).
14. Later in the day Jesus appears to Peter (cf. Luke 24:34).¹⁰
15. The Emmaus road episode (Luke 24:13-35, Mark 16:12-13).¹¹
16. Jesus appears to the eleven, Thomas being absent (Luke 24:36-48, Mark 16:14-18, John 20:19-23).
17. After Jesus leaves, Thomas comes in and they tell him (John 20:24-25).

Post resurrection day events

1. The next Sunday Jesus appears to them again and deals with Thomas (John 20:26-29).
2. Jesus appears to the seven beside the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-22).
3. On a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20).
4. Jesus appears to over 500, also to James (1 Corinthians 15:6-7).¹²
5. The ascension from Olivet (Mark 16:19-20, Luke 24:49-51, Acts 1:3-12).

Conclusion

In sum, I see no reason for doubt: it all happened just as the Text describes it. There are no discrepancies, in spite of the variety of details supplied by various eyewitnesses (including converted guards) and written down by four different Evangelists. It is just what we should expect from an inspired Text—inspired and preserved, to this day.

⁸ When the disciples took off running, of course Magdalene followed them back to the tomb. But she was winded, and could not keep up with them (actually, in that culture women probably seldom ran, so she would really be out of breath, but she was not about to be left out of the action, either). She may have arrived as they were leaving; if not they would pass her on the road. In verse 12 John says that she saw two 'angels'. How did John know they were angels? He had just been there and knew there were no human beings around (the guards were presumably gone before the two got there). The angels were in white, but probably not shining, or Magdalene would have been shaken out of her despair. She was so locked in to her sorrow that not even seeing the wrappings collapsed without the body sank in.

⁹ The question may reasonably be asked: How could Magdalene have time to go and come and Jesus appear to her first and still have time to appear to the women before they got to the disciples, the more so since Matthew 28:8 says the women "hurried and ran"? I offer the following considerations in relief of the perceived difficulty: 1) The Jerusalem of that day was small and distances were short ("nearby", John 19:42)—it was probably less than a mile, or even half a mile, between the tomb and Peter's house, as well as where the other disciples were staying; 2) the women were probably slow in entering the tomb—the guards making like dead men, dark, spooky (it's a cemetery), all very strange, Magdalene the impulsive one wasn't there; they would be leery—Magdalene may have been almost to Peter's house before they worked up the courage to enter the tomb; 3) Magdalene, Peter and John were excited and had extra adrenaline—it didn't take that long; 4) the women ran out of the tomb and the garden, but not necessarily all the way to the disciples—once they got away from the garden and on 'safe' ground they may well have slowed down, or even stopped, to get a grip on themselves and discuss what had happened (Mary, the mother of James, was no longer young, and none of the women was used to running, not to mention the type of clothing they wore). Putting it all together, I see no reason to doubt that it all happened just like the Text says.

¹⁰ I see no way of determining the correct sequence of items 14 and 15, it could have been the other way around. Also, during resurrection Sunday (we don't know just when) many resurrected saints "went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:53), which would have been **dramatic** confirmatory evidence to those who were visited.

¹¹ Some have alleged a discrepancy between the two accounts—their mistake is to tie both accounts to the eleven, which was not the case. There were other people in the upper room, besides the eleven. The eleven were reclining at a table, the 'others' would be nearer the door. The two from Emmaus come bursting in, all excited and probably feeling just a little important; it is the 'others', probably to 'prick their balloon', who say, "Oh, we already know that; He has appeared to Simon". (Human nature hasn't changed, and they didn't have the Holy Spirit yet.) While the two from Emmaus are talking with the 'others', not the eleven, Jesus Himself appears and interacts with the eleven (and they think He's a ghost!). Mark, writing for a Roman audience, is emphasizing that the disciples were not gullible, did not 'believe' because they wanted to—in verse 11 they didn't believe Magdalene, in verse 13 nor the two, in verse 14 Jesus rebukes their unbelief. There is nothing here to impugn the genuineness of these verses—they were certainly written by Mark at the same time that he wrote the rest. According to Matthew 28:17 many days later some were still doubting. In any group of people there are always differing levels of belief and unbelief. People's heads work differently, and at different speeds.

¹² I see no way of determining the correct sequence of the events in items 3 and 4.