

The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

12

One Possible Scenario

The so-called discrepancies between the four Resurrection accounts have been regarded as so glaring that some scholars have stated categorically that no harmonization is possible. But is this really true? In this supplementary lesson, we will take a look at one possible harmonization of the events spanning from the time of Christ's death to his ascension. Our purpose is not to present a water-tight scenario, but rather to show that harmonization is possible.

Let's start our scenario from the time when Jesus is still upon the cross:

- At some point during the crucifixion, Mary (the mother of Jesus) is taken by John to his Jerusalem home (**John 19:26-27**). Since Salome (John's mother) is not mentioned later as being a witness of Christ's burial (note **Mark 15:47**), it is probable that Salome accompanies Mary and John to her home. Because she continues to console Mary, she does not later return with John to witness the actual death of Jesus.
- According to **John 19:38-42** and **Matthew 27:59-61**, four people are listed as being present when Jesus was buried – Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene and Mary (the wife of Clopas and the mother of James). It is also possible that John himself helps with the burial of the body of Jesus. It is also likely, as we will see in a moment, that either Joseph or Nicodemus has servants helping them with the carrying of the body.
- Two other women are not listed as being present when Jesus is buried – Joanna and Susanna. Little of known of Susanna (except for a brief mention in **Luke 8:3**), but Joanna is introduced to us in **Luke 8:3** as “the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household.” Joanna plays a role in the Resurrection account (**Luke 24:10**), but is not present when Jesus is buried. It is possible that while Jesus is on the cross, the women suddenly realize that they have not prepared the ointments for Jesus' burial. Joanna, being wealthy, may have volunteered to go and purchase the spices, or may have prepared them from her own store (since wealthy Jewesses were known to spend large sums on perfumes and ointments). Accompanied possibly

by Susanna, she leaves before Jesus is taken down off the cross, without knowing that Nicodemus has already, on his own volition, purchased 100 *litrai* (about seventy-five pounds or thirty-three kilograms) of myrrh and aloes to anoint the body.

- The preparations for burial are made in haste. With sunset fast approaching, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, possibly helped by John (who we will assume for this scenario is also a participant in the burial), move the body from the place of crucifixion to the burial site behind Golgotha. Although two women are present (and it was usually the job of women to prepare the body for burial), it is the men who wrap the body in the burial shroud and place it in the tomb (**Matthew 27:59-60; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:38-41**), probably once again because of the need for haste. The two women – Mary Magdalene and Mary of Clopas – “saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it” (**Luke 23:55**).
- Sunset is now almost upon them, and so the spices are placed within the folds of the linen shroud (**John 19:40**), but the body itself is not anointed. This would have to wait until after the Sabbath.
- The men – Joseph, Nicodemus and John, together with any servants who may have been present (possibly including the “gardener” or caretaker of the garden) – roll the giant *golel* stone into place across the mouth of the tomb (**Matthew 27:59-60**).
- As the Sabbath approaches, Joanna (and possibly Susanna) begin preparing the spices for use after the Sabbath. The other women, however – Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas and Salome – do not have time to prepare any spices before the onset of the Sabbath. This explains why **Luke 23:56** indicates that “the women” prepare spices *before* the beginning of the Sabbath, while **Mark 16:1** tells us that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome buy spices *after* the Sabbath was over.
- The sun is now setting, and the wailing blasts of the *shabbat shofar* can be heard in nearby Jerusalem. The two Marys, accompanied by John, make their way to the Zebedee home. Joseph, and Nicodemus also return to their own homes.
- Night has now fallen, and throughout Jerusalem the Passover Lamb is being eaten. But it is likely that none of the relatives of Jesus are participating in this festival, since they have begun their mourning.
- During the following day (the high Sabbath which marks the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread), a delegation from the Sanhedrin approach Pilate to request an official Roman guard at the tomb (**Matthew 27:62-65**). A squad of Roman soldiers and/or Temple Guard are commissioned to guard the tomb, and an official Roman seal is fixed to the *golel* stone (**Matthew 27:66**). The guard keeps its vigil at the tomb during the Sabbath interval (spanning either one day or two days – see **ES112-12**, page 13).

- On the Sabbath, Joanna and Susanna visit Salome's home, both to console Jesus' mother and also to coordinate with the other women for the last stages in the burial rites. But the women do not visit the tomb, for they will not violate the Sabbath (**Luke 24:56**).
- At the end of the Sabbath, on Saturday evening, after the blowing of the *shabbat shofar*, three of the women staying at the Zebedee house – Mary Magdalene, Salome and Mary of Clopas – go to the markets to purchase the spices for the burial ointments (**Mark 16:1**).
- It is not unreasonable to assume that those staying at the Zebedee house were concerned to make contact with the other nine disciples, who had fled away from the arrest of Jesus, probably to Bethany. In this scenario, therefore, Clopas and his wife, accompanied by Mary Magdalene,* go to Bethany in order to tell the disciples there what has transpired. This would explain why Matthew (who was one of the nine) reports Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (Clopas' wife) as the two women who set out before daybreak to anoint the body of Jesus (**Matthew 28:1**). Matthew is simply telling the story from his perspective.
- Before daybreak, Clopas, his wife, and Mary Magdalene set off for Jerusalem (**Matthew 28:1**). The two Marys rendezvous with Salome, and collect the spices in preparation for anointing the body of Jesus.
- As the three women set out from the Zebedee house, it is now daybreak (**Luke 24:1**). An earthquake† suddenly shakes the city (**Matthew 28:2**), rousing its inhabitants, although most would assume that it is an after-shock from the earthquake three days earlier (**Matthew 17:51**).
- At the garden tomb, two angels descend from the brightening sky, and the glory of their entrance sends the guards reeling. One of the angels rolls away the *golel* stone and sits upon it (**Matthew 28:2-4**). At this, the guards pick themselves up and run for their lives (**Matthew 28:11**).
- Mary Magdalene, Salome and Mary of Clopas meet Joanna (and maybe Susanna) at a designated meeting place (let's say, the Hasmonean palace, where Joanna lived). They then start toward the city gate and the tomb, but worry about who will help them move the *golel* stone (**Mark 16:2-3**).
- By the time the women reach the gates, the guards have already entered the city (it is possible that the women even passed the guards on their way out). Assuming that the guard is comprised of both Roman soldiers and a contingent of Temple Guards, the Temple Guards convince some of the

* An early tradition claims that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are the same person. If this is true, this would explain why Mary Magdalene went to Bethany on the evening of the Saturday, and would also explain why she, although relatively wealthy (note **Luke 8:2-3**), would need to purchase ointment for Jesus' burial, since she had already expended her precious ointment by anointing Jesus earlier in the week (**John 12:1-8**).

† A cursory reading of **Matthew 28:1-5** would make it appear that the earthquake happened after the arrival of the women, but writers of Greek prose were less interested in relative time than we are today, and thus **verses 2-4** are probably parenthetical, having taken place before **verse 1**.

Roman soldiers that it is in their interest to report to Caiaphas first. And so, as the women head toward the tomb, some of the guards are making their way toward Caiaphas' residence, taking a different route through the city. They have a rushed audience with Caiaphas, who bribes them to tell a story of the disciples stealing the body while they are asleep, on the promise that he will sort things out with Pilate (**Matthew 28:11-15**).

- When the women arrive in the garden, there is no one there and the *golel* has been moved from the entrance (**Mark 16:4**), not, as some assume, to let the resurrected Christ out, but in order to let the witnesses in. The angels are no longer sitting on the stone. They now sit within the tomb, one on each end of the stone slab upon which Christ's body once lay, awaiting the arrival of these witnesses.
- Upon seeing that the stone has been moved, Mary Magdalene jumps to the conclusion that somebody has moved the body without telling them. Distressed, she can only think of getting help from those staying at the nearest house (the Zebedee home), and immediately begins running back to Jerusalem (**John 20:1-2**).
- The remaining women, themselves distressed about the open tomb, decide to investigate the tomb to see whether the body has been taken (**Luke 24:2-3**). They step inside the tomb.
- As their eyes adjust to the darkness, they see two men in gleaming white garments sitting inside the sepulcher. One of them tells the women that Jesus has risen and encourages them to investigate the place where his body had been laid. He then instructs them to report a message back to the disciples (**Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:4-8**).
- The four women leave the garden in great haste to tell the disciples of what they have seen (**Matthew 28:8; Luke 24:9-11**).^{*} They probably split up, with one or two going to the Zebedee house (where Peter and John were) and the rest going to Bethany, where the remaining nine disciples were.
- In the meantime, Mary Magdalene[†] has arrived at the Zebedee house. Almost delirious with grief, she reports to Peter and John: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

^{*} Much has been said of Mark's statement in **16:8**: "[The women] said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." But we know, of course, that they did say something, because otherwise even Mark would have nothing to report! We see a parallel to this expression in **Mark 1:44**, where Jesus told the leper who had been healed, "See that you don't tell this to anyone." Jesus then follows this up with, "But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Jesus' intention was not that the leper never speak about his healing, but rather that a required procedure be followed first. He was not to go around telling people about the healing before he had first had it confirmed by the priest. In the same way, Mark is emphasizing that the women didn't go around telling everyone about what they had seen, even though by then the streets and markets of Jerusalem were filling with the morning crowds. First, they went to report the incident to disciples.

[†] John's account stands alone in only recording Mary Magdalene's experience. This would be in accord with the facts of **John 20:1-9**, for although John knew that other women had gone to the tomb, only Mary Magdalene came back with her initial report of the removal of the body. It was sometime later before John heard the reports from the other women.

- Peter and John run to the tomb to investigate the matter for themselves (see both **John 20:1-9** and **Luke 24:12**). Mary Magdalene herself follows them at a slower pace, exhaustion beginning to take its toll. John races ahead of Peter, but when he gets to the tomb, he's unwilling to go inside. He peers within, and sees the graveclothes but no body. Peter finally arrives and brazenly enters the tomb. Only when Peter has entered the tomb does John follow.* Neither, however, sees an angel.
- As Peter and John return to the Zebedee home (**John 20:10**),[†] Mary Magdalene enters the garden, and the two disciples confirm to her that the body is indeed gone. As Peter and John leave, Mary stands outside the tomb, wailing loudly in traditional Jewish fashion (**John 20:11**).
- Mary bends down and looks into the tomb (**John 20:11**). She is surprised to see two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot (**John 20:12**). They ask her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replies, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put them" (**John 20:13**). She apparently hears someone behind her, and turns to see a man standing there. Through her tears, she doesn't recognize Jesus and, thinking he is the gardener, says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." At this point, Jesus says to her, "Mary!" She then cries out, "Rabboni!" – Aramaic for "my teacher" (**John 20:14-17**).
- Mary Magdalene rushes back to the Zebedee house with the news that Jesus is alive (**John 20:18**).
- In the meantime, some of the women are on their way to Bethany to report to the nine disciples what the angel had told them. As they are heading up the Mount of Olives, Jesus appears to them and gives them further instructions (**Matthew 28:8-10**).
- Jesus then appears to Peter (**Luke 24:34**), to the two on the road to Emmaus (**Luke 24:13-35**), and to the other disciples at various times and in various settings.
- The disciples eventually obey Jesus' instructions and travel to Galilee, where they meet with Jesus by the lake and on a mountain (possibly the same mountain on which he was transfigured). At this time, more than five hundred people see the resurrected Lord (**1 Corinthians 15:6**), and the Lord charges them with the Great Commission.

* John records that at this point he believed. Even though he didn't yet understand the Resurrection from Scripture (**John 20:9**) – that would come later (**Luke 24:25-27,44-47**) – he saw that this was no ordinary grave robbery. He probably realized that no grave robber would take a naked body and leave the graveclothes behind (note **John 20:6-7**). But regardless of the reason, the sight of the graveclothes sparked John's first faith in the resurrection of Christ.

† **Luke 24:9-12** telescopes what was probably two separate visits – one to the nine disciples in Bethany and another to the two disciples in Jerusalem.

- During this time in Galilee, Jesus appears to his brother, James (**1 Corinthians 15:7**).
- After forty days and many appearances, Jesus leads his disciples up onto the Mount of Olives, from whence he then ascends into heaven (**Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9-12**).

Did it happen exactly this way? No one cannot say for certain. But all that is required is to prove that a harmonization of the four accounts is *possible*, and that all four accounts could be accurately and inerrantly describing exactly the same events. When you combine the historical evidence (which doesn't require harmonization of the secondary details) with a courtroom-tight reconciliation of all four witness accounts, you have a solid case for the conclusion that these women really did discover an empty tomb and witness the resurrected Christ.