

## VII. The Resurrection (20:1-21:25)

All four of the gospel writers climaxed their accounts with a record of Jesus' resurrection, but they vary widely in their particulars. Matthew and Mark have the briefest accounts, while Luke and John are more expansive. Even so, there is little overlap between them (cf. Luke 24:13ff; John 21:1-25). But all four recounted the scene at the tomb early Sunday morning when a group of women came to anoint Jesus' body (Matthew 28:1ff; Mark 16:1ff; Luke 24:1ff; John 20:1ff).

### A. The Empty Tomb

So also all four evangelists identified Mary Magdalene as one of the women who visited Jesus' tomb as the sun was beginning to rise. The weekly Sabbath had ended the previous evening at sunset, but the women needed daylight to accomplish their task. They'd come with the embalming spices they'd prepared to further anoint Jesus' body (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1) and that meant entering into the darkened tomb.

1. The women wondered how they'd be able to move the heavy stone that covered the tomb's entrance, but when they arrived they found it rolled away. Matthew added a twist to the story, recording that an angel had rolled away the stone in connection with an earthquake, causing the terrified Roman guards to flee (28:1-4, 11). His account also suggests that this happened shortly before the women arrived at the tomb, for the angel was still present and spoke to them as they approached (28:5-7).

Matthew's three counterparts also noted this angelic appearance, but specifically located it inside the tomb. So also Matthew and Mark mentioned only one angel while Luke and John recorded that there were two (cf. 20:11-13; Mark 16:5-6; Luke 24:2-7). Some have seen this discrepancy as clear evidence against biblical inerrancy, but it really only reflects the normal differences of recollection among multiple witnesses. Indeed, the differences in the gospel accounts actually *substantiate* their authenticity; agreement on every point would prove that the writers colluded to construct a single narrative. There is no contradiction in Mark mentioning only the angel who spoke to the women while two angels were actually present in the tomb. This same sort of reasoning applies to the other differences in the post-resurrection accounts; different witnesses speaking to different communities results in differing accounts with distinct emphases.

The three Synoptists do, however, agree on the message the angel communicated to the women: *Jesus, whom you seek, is not here because He has been raised from the dead just as He said*. Matthew and Mark added the angel's instruction to tell the disciples that Jesus was raised and going ahead of them into Galilee where they would see Him (cf. Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:4-7). For his part, John said nothing of the other women who'd come to the tomb or the angel's announcement of Jesus' resurrection (note vv. 11-13). He recounted that Mary Magdalene arrived to find the stone rolled away and, concluding that Jesus' body had been stolen, she left to tell the disciples (20:1-2). She found Peter and John ("the disciple whom Jesus loved") and told them what she'd discovered and they ran to the tomb to see for themselves. When they arrived, they, too, found it empty with the grave clothes left behind (20:3-7).

Another difference in John's account concerns the matter of *faith*; assuming that he was the other disciple with Peter, John specifically noted his own new-found understanding and belief in Jesus' resurrection when he saw the empty tomb (20:8-9). The Synoptists indicate that none of the Eleven believed until Jesus personally appeared to them and all three specifically associate that faith with the apostles' faithfulness to Jesus' commission at the time of His ascension (cf. Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:33-53).

2. But the most notable unique feature in John's gospel is his account of Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene. His record suggests that she was the very first person to see the resurrected Messiah (20:11-18; cf. Mark 16:9), but Matthew recorded that Jesus appeared to her and Mary, the mother of James ("the other Mary" – 28:1) while they were on their way to report to the disciples (28:8-10). Taken together, the four accounts indicate that several women were part of this group that went to Jesus' tomb that morning. Mary Magdalene was simply the one they – and most especially John – chose to highlight.

a. It seems from John's account that Mary Magdalene followed Peter and John back to the garden after she told them about the empty tomb (cf. 20:2, 11). She either arrived after they'd left (20:10) or remained behind. Either way, John recorded that she was standing outside the tomb when Jesus appeared to her. Interestingly, John mentioned that she initially thought Jesus was the *gardener* (20:15). He doesn't explain why he thought this was important to include in his account, but John's emphasis on Jesus fulfilling the Scriptures suggests that he saw in this an allusion to Jesus' role as a *new Adam*. Adam was a kind of "gardener" in the sense that God placed him in His garden-sanctuary and directed him to tend it as His vice-regent and steward (cf. Genesis 1:27-28 with 2:7-8, 15). So the protoevangelium was God's pledge to restore man and his loving stewardship over all His works; the new Adam would likewise serve as His "gardener."

John recognized (and sought to show) that Jesus is the One promised in all the Scriptures. Thus he likely came to see this post-resurrection appearance in the garden as no accident, but orchestrated by Jesus to reinforce the truth of who He is and what He accomplished by His death and resurrection. Mary's initial assessment, then, provides a perfect pointer toward the truth that Jesus is the Last Adam: the seed of Eve in whom the creation is restored and man becomes truly human, at last fulfilling his identity and calling as image-son and vice-regent.

b. Believing Jesus to be the gardener, she assumed He might be able to explain the empty tomb. When He asked her why she was weeping and whom she was seeking, Mary asked if He'd taken her Lord's body away. At that point Jesus identified Himself by calling her name (20:16). It's unclear why Mary hadn't recognized Him (v. 14). The men on the Emmaus road would share her experience, but, in their case, Luke explained that they were prevented from recognizing Him (ref. Luke 24:13-32). Perhaps it was so with Mary, but it may be that she simply couldn't see Jesus clearly in the early dawn. Or her distress may have veiled His identity; her mind was completely preoccupied with what had happened to Jesus' body and she wasn't at all expecting to see Him alive.

- c. Whatever obscured her perception, when Jesus spoke Mary's name she immediately knew who He was and embraced Him with the exultant cry, "*Rabboni!*" (*my teacher or my master*). Jesus responded by telling her to stop clinging to Him (20:17), a statement which has sparked all sorts of interpretations. Some treat it metaphorically, such that Jesus was saying to Mary, "*Stop clinging to your former notions about Me...*" This interpretation draws together Jesus' transformation in His resurrection and Mary's inability to recognize Him. Mary had embraced and loved Jesus as Israel's Messiah, but without a clear and full understanding. This was especially evident now that He stood before her as the beginning of God's new creation as the firstborn from the dead. In critically important ways, the man Mary clung to was not the man she imagined.

A more common interpretation derives from Jesus' explanation that He had not yet ascended to His Father. The idea is that Jesus was about to present Himself to His Father (then return for 40 days – Acts 1:3) and didn't want Mary holding onto Him. Some argue He was concerned about being defiled by human touch; others believe He was simply telling her to let Him depart. The premise of this view is that Jesus was speaking of an *immediate* ascent to the Father. Other views start with the premise that Jesus was referring to His *eventual* ascension culminating His earthly presence (cf. Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9-11). One example is that Jesus was telling Mary she didn't need to cling to Him because He wasn't leaving at that time. He *was* going to ascend to His Father, but not before completing His work of preparing His disciples for their vocation on behalf of His gospel and kingdom (Acts 1:1-8; cf. also 1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

In the end, Jesus' words must be understood in light of His mission and the new creational reality His resurrection inaugurated. From this perspective, ascension concerns a *new state of being* rather than a *new place of residence*. Jesus' resurrection initiated His new human state as the triumphant, glorified Son who communes with the Father (i.e., has *ascended* into His presence) in a consummate way. So John's account emphasizes Jesus' "return" after His departure in death, then to be with His disciples everlastingly. But Jesus' enduring presence was to be in the person of His Spirit: *He would receive His own into His Father's house by taking them to Himself through His indwelling Spirit* (14:1-6, 16-28, 15:26-16:7, 13-28, 17:11-24). The thing that Mary needed to understand – which her clinging to Jesus showed she didn't yet understand – was that He would be with her as she longed, not by being bodily present, but by His indwelling presence in His Spirit. Jesus' return to the Father (His ascension) would secure His permanent presence with her. Hence His meaning: *Mary, you are clinging to Me in the hope that you will never again be separated from Me. Your hope will be realized, but not by holding onto Me. Rather, your hope lies in My ascension, for in that you will be with Me forever with a greater intimacy than you've known in My bodily presence – an intimacy beyond what you can now imagine.* Jesus' resurrection meant the transformation of His relationship with His own and so also their relationship with God Himself. His God had now become *their* God (Jeremiah 31:31-33) such that His Father was now *their* Father (cf. 1:12-13; 1 John 1:1-3, 3:1-2; Hebrews 2).