

Getting to Know Your Bible

How do I make sense of the differences in the Resurrection accounts between the Gospels?

As with other differences in the Gospel accounts, the Resurrection accounts differ because each author seeks to stress a different point regarding the story that fits into his overall purpose as an author. This in no way undermines the historicity of the account- historical writing has always contained historical facts presented with interpretation, whether it be in the present or in the 1st Century. Yet the Resurrection accounts do seem to differ (not contradict) rather greatly. A plausible reconstruction of the events could be:

1. A group of women come to the tomb near dawn, with Mary Magdalene possibly arriving first (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1-3; Luke 24:1; John 20:1)
2. Mary and the other women are met by two young men who in reality are angels, one of whom acts as the spokesman and announces Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:2-7; Mark 16:4-7; Luke 24:2-7).
3. The women leave the garden with a mixture of fear and joy, at first unwilling to say anything but then resolving to report to the Twelve (Matt. 28:8; Mark 16:8). Mary Magdalene may have dashed on ahead, telling Peter and John in advance of the arrival of the other women (John 20:2).
4. Jesus meets the remaining women en route and confirms their commission to tell the disciples, with the reminder of his promise of meeting them in Galilee. The women obey (Matt. 28:9-10; Luke 24:8-11).
5. Peter and John meanwhile have returned to the tomb, having heard the report by Mary Magdalene, and discover it to be empty (John 20:3-10; Luke 24:12).
6. Mary also returns to the tomb after Peter and John have left. She sees the angels and then Jesus, although at first supposing him to be a gardener (John 20:11-18).
7. Later that afternoon, Jesus appears to Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus and, in a separate incident, to Peter (Luke 24:13-35).

8. That same Sunday evening, Jesus appears to the ten (the Twelve minus Judas and Thomas) behind locked doors in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-23).
9. A week later he appears to the eleven at the same venue, with Thomas now present (John 20:24-29).
10. Further appearances take place over a forty-day period, including in Galilee, with over five hundred seeing him altogether (Acts 1:3; John 21; I Cor. 15:6)
11. A climactic commissioning in Galilee instructs the disciples to spread the news throughout the world (Matt. 28:16-20)
12. Perhaps only shortly thereafter, Jesus gives his parting instructions to await the coming Holy Spirit and ascends into heaven (Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:4-11).

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