

20:1-31 | The Resurrection

This next section covers Jesus' *bodily* resurrection from the dead (20:1-31). While all four gospels have a *version* of this scene, each writer has put this event in his own words, making each retelling *distinct*. This is nothing new for John's readership; most of the things he's relayed up to this point have been unique, and what follows is no different. As we'll see, the Beloved Apostle *supplements* material hitherto unknown in the gospel tradition.

In fact, since each Gospel writer has relayed this event from a unique perspective, there are more than a few differences when comparing the accounts. Arguably, all the variables are, at best, *trivial* (e.g., the *exact* timing of events varies; the *exact* identities of those who first saw the empty tomb differ; the *exact* number of angels and what *exactly* they say diverges, etc.).¹ But it would be disingenuous to deny that such differences exist. For those who espouse that the Scriptures are inerrant (as I do), one must be prepared to explain how such a seemingly obvious problem with the Bible is resolved.

However, resolving all the *alleged* discrepancies between the narratives would require extensive commentary. This is not to say such an endeavor is impossible. Many commentators have provided perfectly plausible explanations for the disagreements in the resurrection accounts.² Their work is an invaluable asset to the church since many unbelievers fixate on those variations, insisting that such things are proof that the resurrection didn't occur. More than one critical text scholar has built their career by making mountains out of molehills while ignoring the remarkable unanimity in the various resurrection accounts (see '*Additional Notes*').

But, as crucial as it may be to try and reconcile all the differences, such a specialized focus is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, we'll focus on the facts the Beloved Apostle has chosen to convey and resist the urge to speculate on why he left other facts on the cutting room floor. It is crucial to grasp John's account *before* attempting to reconcile it with the others, as it provides a unique and insightful perspective on this monumental day. In fact, dwelling *only* on

¹ Carson (1991), p. 632.

² See, e.g., John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publisher, 2005); N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); I General Editors, "Can the various resurrection accounts from the four Gospels be harmonized?" Got Questions, gotquestions.org/resurrection-accounts.html, [accessed January 21, 2025]; Chaffey, Tim, "Christ's Resurrection—Four Accounts, One Reality," April 5, 2015, *Answers In Genesis*, answersingenesis.org/jesus/resurrection/christs-resurrection-four-accounts-one-reality/, [accessed January 21, 2025].

the differences between the gospel accounts would betray the writer's intent. As Hamilton explains,

“Arguments can be made defending the notion that Jesus was raised from the dead, and those arguments have their place. What John gives us in 20:1-18 is more testimony than argument, more narrative than exposition. Arguments are aimed at our reason, at our heads. Testimony and narrative, on the other hand, often work on our gut-level emotions, at our sense of how things are—our senses that work when we are not reasoning through a syllogism but responding to experiences.”³

Remarkably, of everything that occurred on that very first Easter Sunday, John discusses only a handful of events: the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb (vs. 1-9), his interaction with Mary Magdalene (vs. 11-18), his appearance before the disciples (vs. 19-23), and his conversation with Thomas (vs. 24-29). Lastly, the Beloved Apostle rounds out this portion by conveying the *purpose* of his account (vs. 30-31).

It is hard to *overemphasize* the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul reminded the church in Corinth, "For I delivered unto you *first of all* [emphasis added] 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" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The phrase "first of all" is the Greek word **πρῶτος** (*prōtos*) and while it primarily refers to something that's *first in a sequence* (cf. Mat. 10:2; Lu. 13:30; Jn. 20:4), how it is used in this context means it should be understood as referring to something that's *first in rank* (cf. Matt. 22:38; Lu. 15:22; Eph. 6:2).⁴ This is evident by the fact that a few verses later, Paul says, "If Christ be not raised," then that means our "faith is vain," we are "yet in your sins," those Christians who've died have forever "perished," and, as such, "we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:17-19). A lot is riding on this claim.

Thus, while Christians may hold differing views on many matters, the resurrection is non-negotiable. Given the sheer volume of scholarship that seeks to undermine the doctrine of the resurrection, it would be foolish *not* to regard it, in the words of Paul, as a matter of "*first* importance."⁵ The truth at the heart of Easter is a hill worth dying on.⁶ The day the Son of God rose from the dead is either the *greatest day* in history or the *greatest hoax* in history. One's

³ Hamilton, James M., Jr., *John*, ESV Expository Commentary, vol. 9, (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2019), p. 293.

⁴ BDAG, p. 893.

⁵ 1 Cor. 15:3 (ESV)

⁶ For a discussion on other "hills" worth dying on and ones that aren't, see Gavin Ortlund's book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* (Crossway, 2020).

stance on this issue ultimately determines whether they are a believer or an unbeliever (cf. Ac. 26:23-28).

Exegesis

20:1-2 – Nothing is known about what transpired between Jesus’ burial and his bodily resurrection. As with the Synoptics, John moves straight to “the first day of the week”—i.e., Sunday—where “Mary Magdalene” is described as visiting Jesus’ “sepulchre.” Of course, this is the same Mary who, after being delivered by Jesus from a seven-fold demonic possession (cf. Mar. 16:9), supported him financially while accompanying him in his travels (cf. Lu. 8:2); she was also one of the key witnesses to both the Lord’s crucifixion (cf. 19:25) and his burial (cf. Mat. 27:61).

John tells us that Mary Magdalene set out to the tomb “early, when it was yet dark.”⁷ She may be alone at this point. If so, this means Mary Magdalene visited the tomb on *two* occasions. This would explain the difference between her message of despair in verse 2 and the one of hope recorded in the Synoptics (cf. Mat. 28:8; Lu. 24:8-11). On her first trip, she assumed someone had *stolen* the body, whereas, on her second trip, because she had interacted with the risen Lord, her tune had changed. However, it is just as likely that John's version expands the accounts recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.⁸ If so, this means Mary Magdalene wasn't alone (cf. 19:38-42; Lu. 23:50-56); it is possible that “Mary the mother of James...Salome” (Mar. 16:1), as well as “Joanna...and other women” (Lu. 24:10), all accompanied her to the tomb that morning.⁹ It is common for one gospel writer to mention that only *one* person was at an event while another writer reveals that there were, in fact, *multiple* people present (cf. 19:38-42; Lu. 23:50-56). And, considering Jerusalem would've been teeming with unfamiliar and potentially dangerous people, it would've been unsafe for a woman to strike out in the dark to visit a

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 635, “John emphasizes the darkness of the dawn because he is still using light/darkness symbolism: the darkness of the hour is the perfect counterpart to the darkness that still shrouds Mary’s understanding.”

⁸ The Greek of Mar. 16:2 (**ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου**) is variously translated: “when the sun had risen” (ESV; NASB; NKJV), “just after sunrise” (NIV), “at sunrise” (CSB), and “at the rising of the sun” (KJV). The variety of translations shows that Mark’s verbiage is imprecise. Most likely, Mary came to the tomb *at* or *after* sunrise. If so, John makes it clear that Mary started her journey “while it was yet dark,” but by the time she arrived at the tomb, the sun had risen (cf. Köstenberger (2008), p. 561).

⁹ John only mentions Mary in verse 1, implying that she was alone, but Mary's use of the plural pronoun, “we,” in verse 2 implies that she wasn't alone. However, Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 371, shows that some commentators are convinced that her usage of “we” isn't a “genuine plural; [instead,] it reflects an Oriental mode of speech whereby plural can be used for singular.” Köstenberger (2008), p. 562, disagrees, insisting the “we” refers to the other women mentioned in Matt. 28:1; Mar. 16:1; Lu. 24:10.

cemetery all alone, especially since she, being from Magdala, wasn't a local herself. Thus, Mary must've been accompanied by others, likely by the very women mentioned above.¹⁰

Interestingly, this sorority didn't come to the tomb just to pay their respects; they went for a special purpose: to anoint Jesus' body with even more spices (cf. 19:39-40; Mar. 16:1c). Due to the Sabbath being so close at hand by the time they took Jesus off the cross, these women were unable to honor their master properly. Admittedly, they might've been able to perform this task on Saturday, but the Sabbath didn't end till sundown, which likely prevented them from coming. Anointing Jesus' body would be safer during the day, and daylight would ensure it would be done properly. So, Mary Magdalene and her companions did not delay, coming at first light on Sunday morning. They took the first opportunity they had to commemorate Jesus Christ. And, as we'll see, their prompt arrival will ensure they're the *first* to discover something remarkable.

Instead of finding a stone covering the entrance to the tomb, as they had expected (cf. Mar. 16:3), John says the women saw "the stone taken away from the sepulcher." At which point, John tells us that Mary Magdalene "ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [aka, the Apostle John], and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."¹¹ It is worth noting that the empty tomb *did not*, in and of itself, encourage Mary Magdalene; quite the opposite, it produced *hopelessness* (cf. vs. 11). She could not fathom that, perhaps, there was another possibility. Of course, Mary isn't to be criticized, but her gut reaction illustrates how grief can cloud a person's judgment. Death can drive even the most devout person to despair, leading them to make *illogical* conclusions.

Ironically, just as Mary Magdalene accuses the Sanhedrin of taking Jesus' body, the Sanhedrin will accuse the apostles of doing the same thing despite knowing better. To control the narrative, the religious leaders will claim that the disciples "came by night and stole [Jesus' body] away while [the soldiers guarding the tomb] slept" (Matt. 28:13). Such a statement, at the very least, acknowledges that Jesus' body went missing, a fact which Jesus' followers would not dispute.

However, while body snatching is a plausible theory for the sudden disappearance of Jesus' body, as mentioned before, such an explanation is illogical and doesn't stand up to scrutiny. First, while not unheard of in first-century Palestine, instances of grave robberies are "quite

¹⁰ Keener (2003), 2:1178; Klink (2016), p. 828; Kruse (2017), p. 438.

¹¹ Mary's mention of a missing "body" and not just the stone door being displaced implies that she looked inside, but it's just as likely that, upon seeing the open tomb, she assumed Jesus' body wasn't there.

rare,"¹² likely due to the fact that such a crime was a *capital* offense.¹³ Second, in defense of the Sanhedrin, it doesn't make sense that a group would go to such lengths to kill Jesus only to then exhume his body. A tomb that remained sealed (cf. Mat. 27:66) and undisturbed would've been validation for the religious leaders. And, lastly, in defense of the disciples, accusing them of grave robbing is absurd, especially in the way in which they were charged—i.e., while the soldiers *slept*. The type of stones used to seal tombs, whether disk-shaped or cork-like, were "extremely difficult to move once it was in place."¹⁴ Archeological studies of first-century tombs reveal that stone doors like these would've weighed "one-and-one-half to two tons."¹⁵ Thus, it is unlikely that the disciples would have been able to open Jesus' tomb, which had been sealed with a substantial stone, without *waking* the Roman soldiers. A better lie (though this isn't without its difficulties) would have been that the disciple overpowered the guard.

Vs. 3-5 – "Peter" and "that other disciple," aka John the Beloved, didn't delay once they heard Mary Magdalen's report. News such as this needed to be confirmed as quickly as possible. So, we're told that the two disciples immediately "went forth and came to the sepulcher." But, before being informed about what the two men saw when they got to the tomb, we're given an account of a *race*. John says, "So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter and came first to the sepulcher." Peter's visit to the tomb was old news (cf. Lu. 24:12). However, John expands on this familiar scene, showing that he had not only accompanied Peter that morning but also beaten his friend to the tomb.

Admittedly, such an observation has led some to assume that John is gloating; however, this is speculative. It is no secret that the apostles were competitive (cf. 21:21; Mar. 10:37; Lu. 9:46; 22:24). But John beating Peter to the tomb is not evidence of a *rivalry*; it's proof of eyewitness *testimony*. Our narrator simply narrates events as he has witnessed them. After all, though John was the *first*, Peter went the *farthest* (vs. 6). Of the two, which was the more impressive feat? Arguably, if John had been interested in settling some score, stopping short of entering the tomb wouldn't have been the most flattering admission. Also, it would be entirely out of character for John to say nothing of Christ (cf. 13:12-15) to glorify himself at this moment.¹⁶

¹² Klink (2016), p. 829.

¹³ Kruse (2017), p. 438.

¹⁴ Gower (2005), p. 69.

¹⁵ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, (Nashville, TN; HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017), p. 254.

¹⁶ Carson (1991), p. 639, "To speak of rivalry between the two men, however, not only goes beyond what this passage says, it is to fly in the face of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, where the two are presented as friends, not competitors."

A far more likely interpretation of John's "win" is this: the empty-tomb claim complies with the standards outlined in the Mosaic law regarding admissible evidence. To establish the facts of a case in a court of law, the testimony of "two or three witnesses" was the rule of thumb (cf. Deut. 17:6; 19:15). John shows that a *two-fold* eyewitness account backs up the assertion that Jesus' tomb was empty three days after the crucifixion.¹⁷ While some may argue that the presence of Mary Magdalene and other ladies more than meets that qualification, sadly, a woman's word didn't hold as much credibility as that of a man's in the ancient world (cf. Lu. 24:11). Thus, John's retelling of this event not only validates the initial reports of the empty tomb but also gives further credence to the testimony of those women who saw it first.¹⁸

Though he was the first to arrive at the tomb, John does not tell us why he didn't go in. Instead, he tells us, "stooping down, and looking in, [he] saw the linen clothes lying." That the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb, but the "linen clothes" were undisturbed, is yet another strike *against* the grave robbery hypothesis. What sort of tomb raider would, first, take the time to unwrap a corpse before stealing it and, second, position the strips of cloth so that it matched the outline of the body? Such a claim not only strains credulity, it would've increased the likelihood of getting caught, especially since, as the religious leaders claimed, Roman soldiers were sleeping right outside the tomb.

Vs. 6-7 – Unlike John, who failed to enter the tomb, we're told that once "Simon Peter" arrived, the lead apostle "went into the sepulcher." It seems the lead apostle's bold and assertive demeanor had begun to return (cf. 18:15-18, 25-27; Lu. 22:32). Like John, Peter "seeth the linen clothes lie." So, what the Beloved Apostle saw *outside* was the same as what the Lead Apostle saw *inside*.

In fact, Jesus' burial garments weren't the only things left unaffected. John says, "The napkin that was about his head [wasn't] lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself." The "napkin that was about his head" referred to a strip of cloth covering the head to secure the jaw. Without this piece, the mouth of the deceased would hang open, an unflattering and unsettling sight.¹⁹ That this particular cloth wasn't "lying with the linen clothes,

¹⁷ Köstenberger (2008), p. 563.

¹⁸ Klink (2016), p. 830, "This anonymous disciple has not only become an "ideal author" as one who has been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and an "ideal disciple" as one who has special access and intimate relationship with Jesus (see 13:25), but he also serves as an "ideal witness" as one who will see the empty tomb with his own eyes and come to understand its true significance (see v.8)."

¹⁹ Keener (2003), 2:850, "Jewish sources frequently mention such shrouds for wrapping and binding the corpse. To prevent premature distortion of tissue, those preparing the body would bind the cheeks to keep the mouth closed; they closed the body's orifices and sometimes placed the body on cold sand to inhibit swelling. If our later sources approximate relevant conditions, as they probably would in this case, the head cloth was about one yard square."

but wrapped together in a place by itself," indicates that it had been separated from the rest of the grave clothes.²⁰ Thus, on the one hand, the strips of cloth that covered Jesus' legs, torso, and arms seem to have passed straight through his body, crumpling like a deflated balloon.²¹ On the other hand, the face covering was repositioned in the most unusual way. Jesus seems to have taken great care with the "napkin," folding and setting to the side like a piece of laundry.²²

In this way, the resurrection of Jesus was far greater than that of Lazarus. Lazarus came out of his tomb, bound head to toe. Jesus forever loosed the garments of death, leaving them discarded and dismissed. Lazarus would eventually die again. The Lord forever loosed the bonds of death, leaving it impotent and impaired.

Vs. 8-10 – Apparently spurred on by Peter's boldness, John, aka "that other disciple," aka, the one "which came first to the sepulcher," finally enters the tomb himself. After getting a closer look, John said that he "believed."²³ Though looks can be deceiving, sometimes, seeing is believing. But what, exactly, did John believe? Mary Magdalene's report of grave robbery? Unlikely, given the state of Jesus' wrappings. John must mean that he "believed" that Jesus rose from the dead. The same evidence that caused Mary to despair caused John to believe. Unlike Mary Magdalene (vs. 11-18), as well as Thomas (vs. 24-29), John didn't need a personal interaction with the risen Savior to grasp the impossible; he believed that the impossible was possible based on nothing more than an *empty* tomb and some *emptied* grave clothes. However unlikely it may have seemed to everyone else, John knew then that no one had exhumed Jesus' remains. For the Beloved Disciple, the only logical assumption is that the Lord walked out of that tomb under his own power. In the words of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

John's belief is even more impressive because neither he nor Peter "knew...the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead." In other words, the Beloved Apostle believed *before* he perfectly understood all the implications of God's word (cf. 11:17-27, 39-40).²⁴ He trusted that the Lord rose from the dead without fully comprehending all the passages that addressed the concept of the resurrection (e.g., Psa. 16:10; Isa. 53:10-12; Hos. 6:2; Jonah 1:17 cf. Mat. 12:40).

²⁰ Klink (2016), p. 832.

²¹ Carson (1991), p. 637, mentions that in the same way his body passed through the grave clothes, "he later appeared in a locked room (vv. 19, 26)."

²² Köstenberger (2008), p. 564.

²³ It is possible that Peter believed, but it is unlikely, given what is said in Lu. 24:12: "Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulcher; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, *wondering* [emphasis added] in himself at that which was come to pass."

²⁴ Morris (1995), p. 736.

Thus, contrary to what some may claim, the disciples didn't fabricate Jesus' resurrection to fit it in with the OT scriptures. By their own admission, the apostles had yet to see the correlation (cf. Lu. 24:27, 32, 45).

However, while John's faith is praiseworthy, it is clearly deficient. A faith not reinforced by a robust understanding of Scripture is flawed. This explains why, rather than shouting in the middle of the streets that Jesus was alive, John and Peter "went away again unto their own home." Despite believing in the resurrection, the Beloved Apostle didn't grasp how it fit in with the Bible, and because of that, his life didn't change.²⁵ This is also why, later *that very same day*, we'll see the disciples, including John, cowering in fear of the Jews (vs. 19). This group is a far cry from what they'll become on the Day of Pentecost (cf. Ac. 2), since, by that point they'll not only have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but they'll better understand God's word. A belief system rooted only in inexplicable supernatural experiences is, at its best, defective. There is no objectivity by which to anchor one's faith. In contrast, a belief system that's first and foremost dependent on scriptural comprehension is so solid that no experience, be it supernatural or not, will be able to shake it. After all, heaven and earth will pass away, yet God's word will remain (cf. Matt. 24:35). A faith dependent on God's word alone is faith par excellence (vs. 29).

²⁵ John's faith was also deficient because he had yet to receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (cf. 16:13; 20:22).

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 94 | John 20:3-10

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Last week, we saw Mary Magdalene's reaction to the empty tomb. Today, we'll study John and Peter's reactions. And as we'll see, while John will believe that the Lord rose from the dead, he himself will make the point that he did not understand, at least at the moment, how the resurrection fit into the scriptures. Thus, as admirable as John's faith may seem, it is ultimately deficient. Far better is a belief system that's first and foremost dependent on scriptural comprehension. Such a faith is so solid that no experience, be it supernatural or not, will be able to shake it. After all, heaven and earth will pass away, yet God's word will remain (cf. Matt. 24:35). A faith dependent on God's word alone is faith par excellence (vs. 29).

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

Give: <https://www.gracepointelife.com/give/>

Podcast Details:

Season 1 | 94