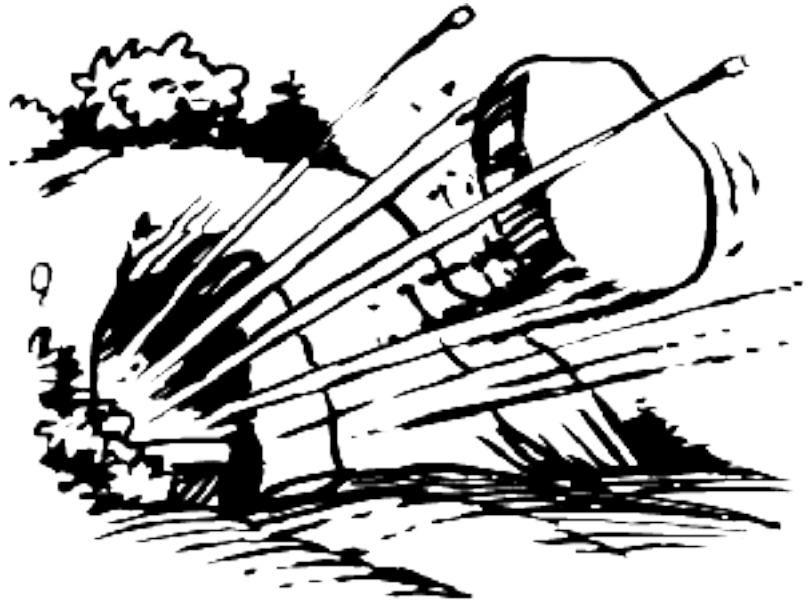


# A Harmony of the Resurrection Accounts

The resurrection accounts are eyewitness reports. Like any eyewitness testimony, the testimony is given from a particular perspective, concerns a particular group that the eyewitness was a part of, and at first glance may appear to contain discrepancies compared to other testimony. This is exactly what we would expect to find, if people were giving testimony to an actual event!



If the resurrection was not an actual event in history, but a fabricated story, then there would be no surface differences. A fabricated story would be told from the perspective of the same people and pretty much in the same words and order. That is not what we find in the resurrection accounts. We see the resurrection from the perspective of different eye witnesses with lists of different people (called by different names) approaching the tomb, different numbers of angels, and different individuals seeing Jesus at different times. This is actually a mark of authenticity.

As Tim Keller (author of [The Reason for God](#)) writes: "In modern novels, details are added to create the aura of realism, but that was never the case in ancient fiction.... The only explanation for why an ancient writer would mention the cushion, the 153 fish, and the doodling in the dust is because the details had been retained in the eyewitnesses' memory."

In other words, New Testament writers would have had to be brilliant enough to create not only an entirely different way of understanding resurrection, but also to create a new literary genre, the modern novel, at least 1,700 years before it came into existence!

We have five (possibly six) different accounts of the resurrection and there are differences in these accounts. But the differences are only apparent, not real. If we judge ancient literature according to the standards of its own time - for example, allowing one author to mention only the main speaker and another author to mention the exact number - then a careful reading of all of the accounts provides a fairly clear picture of what happened during those final 40 days of Jesus' time on earth.

Here is a harmony of the resurrection accounts <sup>1</sup> found in the gospels and the epistles. Since we weren't present during those 40 days, any harmony has to be tentative. Other harmonies are certainly possible, but this harmony makes sense of all of the testimony and fits together chronologically.

1. Jesus is raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit of God (Romans 1:4). Perhaps the moment of Christ's resurrection coincided with the "severe earthquake" (Matthew 28:2).
2. An earthquake occurred before dawn, an angel rolled away the stone from the entrance of the tomb to the show that the tomb was empty and to allow the women to enter when they arrive. The guards trembled and fled (Matthew 28:2-4,11).

3. As Sunday morning was dawning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (mother of the apostles John & James) approach the tomb, intending to embalm Jesus (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; John 20:1), but to their amazement they find the stone already rolled away (Mark 16:3-4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1).
4. Mary Magdalene immediately returns to tell Peter and John (John 20:1-2) that the body of the Lord is missing.
5. Mary (the mother of James) and Salome enter the tomb and see an angel (= a young man) who announces the resurrection and directs the women to tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee (Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:5-7).
6. These two women return to the city, but at first do not report the news of the angelic vision and message, because of their awe and fright (Matthew 28:8; Mark 16:8).
7. Certain women from Galilee, along with Joanna (cf. Luke 8:3), go to the tomb, also planning to embalm the body of Jesus (Luke 24:1). They meet two angels (Luke 24:4-8) and then return to report the resurrection "to the eleven and to all the rest." The disciples had scattered when Jesus was arrested (see Matthew 26:56). They have evidently now gathered together again (Luke 24:9).
8. Informed by Mary Magdalene, Peter and John run to the tomb (without meeting Mary the mother of James and Salome), observe the grave clothes, and return home (John 20:3-10; Luke 24:12).
9. Mary Magdalene follows Peter and John to the tomb, sees two angels inside, and then meets Jesus (John 20:11-17; cf. Mark 16:9).
10. Mary Magdalene returns to inform the disciples that Jesus is risen (John 20:18; cf. Mark 16:10f.).
11. Mary the mother of James and Salome haven't said anything about the angel's message yet. Jesus meets Mary the mother of James (and perhaps Salome and others) and directs them to tell his brethren to go to Galilee (Matthew 28:9f.).
12. The disciples have now had reports of the resurrection from three sources (Mary Magdalene; Joanna and the women from Galilee; Mary the mother of James (and perhaps Salome and others)), but they refuse to believe the reports (Luke 24:10f.; cf. Mark 16:11), until Peter and John confirm it (cf. John 20:10).
13. Later in the morning Peter sees Jesus (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5), perhaps while visiting the tomb again.
14. During the afternoon Jesus appears to two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35; cf. Mark 16:12-13.).
15. That evening, Jesus appears to the Ten, Thomas being absent (Luke 24:33-49; John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 15:5).
16. One week later Jesus appears to the Eleven, Thomas being present (John 20:26-29; cf. Mark 16:14).
17. Seven disciples have an encounter with Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee (John 21:1-23).
18. The Eleven and others see Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-18).
19. Jesus appears to some five hundred brethren (1 Corinthians 15:6).
20. Jesus appears to James, his half-brother (1 Corinthians 15:7).
21. Immediately before his ascension, Jesus appears to the Eleven near Bethany (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:6-11; 1 Corinthians 15:7; cf. Mark 16:19).

On this tentative reconstruction of events:

- (i) The women go to the tomb (#3, 7) during that brief period in the early morning that may be called "semi-darkness" (in relation to the night that is ending -thus John) or "semi-light" (in relation to the day that is dawning [thus Matthew and Luke] or has just dawned [thus Mark]).
- (ii) Mary Magdalene makes two visits to the tomb; on the second she sees two angels and then Jesus.
- (iii) Mary the mother of James and Salome see one angel, and later Mary the mother of James (and possibly Salome) see Jesus.
- (iv) Joanna and the women from Galilee make one visit, see two angels, but not Jesus.
- (v) Peter makes one visit and later (possibly on a second visit) sees Jesus, but no angel.

	Mt 28:1-20	Mk 16:1-8	Lk 24:1-53	Jn 20:1-29	Jn 21:1-23	Ac 1:6-11	1 Co 15:3-7	Mk 16:9-20
1	x	x	x	x			x	x
2	x							
3	x	x						
4				x				
5	x	x						
6	x	x						
7			x					
8			x	x				
9				x				x
10				x				x
11	x							
12			x					x
13			x				x	
14			x					x
15			x	x			x	
16				x				x
17					x			
18	x							
19							x	
20							x	
21			x			x	x	x

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon work done by Murray J. Harris given to me in seminary and used by his permission. After the original writing of this article Dr. Harris published "Three Crucial Questions about Jesus" by Murray J. Harris, Baker Books, 1994, ISBN 0-8010-4388-3. A list similar to the above can be found in the appendix to Dr. Harris' book, pages 107-109.