

Luke 24:1-12
The Resurrection

The Incarnation is profound. That God would take on human flesh, that the infinite God would set aside the use of some of His attributes for the sole purpose of living like us, is beyond my understanding. And then there is the crucifixion. That God would suffer and die, and that He would suffer and die for me, is humbling. Without the Incarnation, there could be no crucifixion, and without the crucifixion, there could be no atonement. But we cannot miss the fact that the crucifixion, while it fully atoned for the sins of God's elect, would be an empty gesture without the resurrection.

The resurrection is *the* crucial event of human history. It is the validation of the Christian faith. As Paul emphasized, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). If Christ remained in the grave, then He was not Who He said He was. And if that is the case, the atonement did not happen, and our sins have not been paid for.

The early Christians understood the importance of the resurrection. Believers began to meet on Sunday, rather than the Old Testament Sabbath (Saturday) because they realized that Sunday was the day Jesus had risen from the grave and therefore inaugurated a new covenant. In addition, the resurrection demonstrated that the believer not only received forgiveness of sins, but the promise of everlasting life. The Old Testament law had never provided for that. Its focus was designed to maintain the relationship between God and His people while they lived on earth. The resurrection meant that people are not only forgiven in this life, but assured of a life to come.

Despite what people who are committed to a material existence alone may argue, this world is not all there is. In fact, Scripture teaches us that this world is a mere shadow of what is to come. All who live will die, and all who die will one day rise again. Everlasting life is for everyone.

“²⁵Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; ²⁷and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:25-29).

This hope of life after death has been embedded throughout redemptive history.

“²⁵As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.
²⁶Even after my skin is destroyed,
Yet from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

The resurrection of all who die was referenced in the early sermons preached by leaders in the Church,
“¹As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, ²being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:1-2).

“¹⁴But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; ¹⁵having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:14-15).

The resurrection of those who die is predicated upon the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. If He did not, then we will not. The fact of the resurrection of Jesus was fundamental to early Christian teaching.

Peter - “³⁸You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. ³⁹We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. ⁴⁰God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible” (Acts 10:38-40).

Paul - “²⁷For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. ²⁸And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised Him from the dead, ³¹and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people (Acts 13:27-31).

With such a central event, it should not surprise us that all four writers of the life of Jesus discussed the resurrection at length. And, naturally, the accounts were quite different. The Holy Spirit inspired each of the gospel writers to recount the event according to the specific purpose of the general narrative which they were writing. Each author had a particular audience and authorial intent, and each retelling of the resurrection reflected that. In fact, that the narratives differ in particulars provides evidence that they were neither the result of a collaborative effort, nor based on a single common source. Yet despite their differences, in the basic general story, all agree that:

Jesus truly died,
The tomb was empty,
Angels explained what had occurred,
The first people to see the risen Jesus were women, and
The disciples and other followers did not at first believe the story.

The Empty Tomb

Jesus had predicted that “just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Since Jewish people at the time had no specific names for the days of the week, a “day and a night” was

considered a day. They simply counted days in relation to the Sabbath. Thus Saturday had been the Sabbath, and Sunday would have been “the first day of the week” (v. 1). Luke had recorded that “⁵⁵the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (Luke 23:55-56).

Now, these same women “at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared” (v. 2). In the rush to get Jesus buried before the Sabbath began and no work was permitted, they had not had the opportunity to finish preparing the body for burial. In the harsh, dry climate of Palestine, bodies decomposed rapidly. Giving the body of Jesus attention quickly was paramount if it was to be buried properly.

Some critics have made an issue over the apparent difference in time when the women first went to the tomb. Luke writes they went “at early dawn.” Matthew writes, “as it began to dawn” (Matthew 28:1), Mark “when the sun had risen” (Mark 16:2), and John “while it was still dark” (John 20:1). Can these be reconciled? I think very easily. The tomb was located outside of the city and required a walk of some distance to arrive there. They could have left “while it was still dark” and arrived after “the sun had risen.” Even if it only took about fifteen minutes to walk to the tomb, that is sufficient time for the sun to rise. In addition, not all of the women arrived at the tomb at the same time. Mary Magdalene had gone on ahead and arrived first. Their different arrival times can also account for any apparent discrepancy in the texts.

By combining the four gospel narratives, we can recreate the sequence of events that Sunday morning. As we mentioned, it seems that Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb first and “saw the stone already taken away from the tomb” (John 20:1). She presumed someone had stolen the body, and distraught “she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘they have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him’” (John 20:2).

Needing to see for themselves, Peter and John went to the tomb. John was the faster of the two and arrived first. However, he was reluctant to enter and stood “stooping and looking in, [where] he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in” (John 20:5). Often the entrances to such tombs were low doors and one had to crouch or even crawl into the tomb. Mary Magdalene did not return to the tomb until sometime later, since both the other women and Peter and John had left by the time she returned. She still thought that the body of Jesus had been stolen, so she was

“¹¹standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³And they said to her, ‘woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him’” (John 20:11-13).

While Mary Magdalene was rushing off to inform the disciples that, as she thought, the body of Jesus had been stolen, the other women arrived at the tomb and “found the stone rolled away” (v. 2). The large stone had been a concern, since on their way there they “were saying to one another, ‘who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?’” (Mark 16:3). Obviously, they knew nothing of the

Roman guard that had been ordered to guard the tomb (it had been assigned on Saturday while they were observing the Sabbath), or they would have been more concerned about that.

As for that contingent of Roman soldiers, these well trained, battle hardened, and highly competent Roman soldiers assigned to guard the tomb were nowhere to be found. ²“A severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. ³And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men” (Matthew 28:2-4). Upon regaining their senses

¹¹“some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.

¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³and said, ‘you are to say, “His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.” ¹⁴And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble”” (Matthew 28:11-15).

With neither the stone nor the guard to stop them, the women went into the tomb but “they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus” (v. 3). Therefore, these women could affirm that the tomb was empty. Also, the soldiers knew the tomb was empty. They had not stayed because the body was gone, so there was nothing left to guard. In addition, the Jewish leaders knew the tomb was empty or they would not have needed to fabricate a lie to explain why the body was missing. And, Mary Magdalene knew the tomb was empty or she would not have run off to tell Peter and John. Finally, Peter and John knew the tomb was empty because they had personally looked into the tomb to confirm the reports of Mary Magdalene. All were agreed, the tomb in which Jesus had been buried on Friday was empty.

The Explanation

When the women entered the tomb, they were confused, but that emotion quickly changed. ⁴“While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; ⁵and as the women were terrified” (v. 4-5). The women went from being perplexed to being terrified. Despite the shock, they responded as best they could. They “bowed their faces to the ground” (v. 5). This was a sign of respect and submission. The appearance of the ‘men’ signified them as angelic messengers. And the women responded as humans usually did when confronted with angelic beings (think of Daniel 8, for example).

But here again, we seem to have an inconsistency. Were these men or angels? Did one of them speak or both? Luke states there were two men and implies that both spoke. Matthew identifies “the angel said to the women” (Matthew 28:5), Mark says the women saw “they saw a young man” (Mark 16:5), and John, referring to Mary Magdalene says “she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying” (John 20:12). But again, these are details. And again, the variation speaks to the fact that the different accounts were not composed in cooperation or derived from a common source. Each writer is telling the story as they understood it.

Angels appear as men (as opposed to horses or grapefruit), and there easily could have been two but since only one of them spoke Matthew and Mark mention only that one. Both of these authors had used the

same verbiage (of referring only to one who spoke when two were present) on previous occasions in their narrative (Matthew 20:30, Mark 10:46).

The angelic beings addressed the women with a rhetorical question, “Why do you seek the living One among the dead?” (v. 5). Because the women were probably too afraid to even offer an answer, the angel continued “He is not here, but He has risen” (v. 6). Still, the women did not respond. So the angel offered some additional encouragement, “⁶remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, ⁷saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.” (v. 6-7). Finally the light of understanding dawned. The women “remembered His words” (v. 8). The spices that had brought to anoint His body were proven to be unnecessary.

The Believing Women

Upon regaining their composure, the women “returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest” (v. 9). They were beginning to understand. They had to tell the men. They had to share the news. As Matthew recounts, they “left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples” (Matthew 28:8).

These women “were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them” (v. 10). They “¹⁰were telling these things to the apostles. ¹¹But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them” (v. 10-11). What seemed nonsense? Remember that these women arrived after Mary Magdalene had told Peter and John about the stone being rolled away and the body being stolen (or so she assumed). The other disciples knew nothing. The women were probably speaking over one another and not being particularly clear. The men tried to ask clarifying questions but everyone kept interrupting each other, as often happens in moments of great emotion.

The women were trying to explain that Jesus had risen and tried to get the disciples to remember that He had said He would. Their message was not from the angels only. While they were on their way to tell the disciples, “⁹Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, ‘do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me’” (Matthew 28:9-10). The women were responding in obedience to their Master.

We have discussed before the relationship between Jesus and women, and how His graciousness and compassion toward women was distinctive for the time in which He lived. In fact, the role of women in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is extraordinary. John was the only disciple mentioned at the cross. Also, none of the disciples were present at His burial. Joseph and Nicodemus had buried Jesus, but they did not see the empty tomb. Only these women were present at all three occasions. They were present at the death of Jesus, observed His burial, and were the first to see His resurrected body. At a time when women were generally not permitted to offer testimony in Jewish courts, it was women whom God used to validate the most important moment in history, “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed” (Deuteronomy 19:15).

It might seem that Mary Magdalene was not a valid witness, since she had assumed that the body of Jesus had been stolen. But that was not the end of her resurrection experience. Later, she returned to the tomb, and as she was trying to explain her heartache that the body of Jesus had been stolen,

“¹⁴she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, ‘woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, ‘sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.’ ¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” (John 10:11-16).

After spending a moment or two with her risen Savior, ‘Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord,’ and that He had said these things to her” (John 20:18). She, too, responded in obedience and testified to the validity of the resurrection.

The Unbelieving Disciples

As mentioned previously, the disciples heard all these words as nonsense. It was the mere prattling of hysterical women. Whatever had happened, whatever they thought they had seen, it was simply not possible that Jesus had arisen. There had to be some other explanation. But we must not be too quick to judge. We also hear many truths to which we do not respond in faith. And we have two thousand years of Christian testimony Peter, John, and the others did not possess.

Luke states here that “Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened” (v. 12). Peter did not go to the tomb a second time, this is the same even recounted by the other gospel writers. Luke inserts it in his narrative at this point because it fits his purposes in retelling the story.

That the disciples did not at first believe that Jesus had been resurrected is significant. That they had to be convinced (and would be by subsequent events) is itself evidence for the resurrection. If the story was fabricated, it would have been fabricated from the beginning. The disciples did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead. When they were first told that He had, they found it impossible to believe.

The disciples needed evidence, and that evidence was the empty tomb. Pilate had no motive for ordering the body removed. He had enough trouble with the Jewish leaders as it was, and he hoped that by handing over this rebellious rabbi to be crucified, he had bought a time of peace and quiet. The Roman guards had no motive for moving the body. They were simply doing their job of guarding it; there was nothing to gain and much to lose by being disobedient to their commanding officer. The Jewish leaders certainly had no motive for removing the body. A resurrected Jesus was the last thing they hoped to hear about. The crucifixion of Jesus was precisely what they needed to dispel any notion that He was the Messiah. If He had been raised from the dead, then they had been proved wrong. Grave robbers cannot be to blame, for Jesus could hardly have been expected to be buried with great wealth, and there were other tombs not guarded by Roman soldiers that would have been easier to pilfer. Also, why would grave robbers have left the tomb so neatly arranged (John 20:7).

Takeaways

We simply cannot dispute the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. It is the cornerstone of our faith. Our hope rests upon this validation of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Let us appreciate its power and live in obedience to our calling as sons and daughters of the resurrected King.