

# John Versus the Synoptic Gospels on Mary Magdalene's Visit to the Tomb

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## Abstract

In this article, a solution is proposed to an alleged contradiction between the Gospel of John, and the Synoptic Gospels—an apparent contradiction concerning whether or not Mary knew that Jesus was raised when she saw the disciples after her visit to the tomb. John appears to suggest that Mary did not know that Jesus was raised from the dead, whereas the Synoptic Gospels appear to indicate that she did know this. However, it is most likely that Mary Magdalene did not know Jesus was raised from the dead, but the other women did. Therefore, there is no contradiction, because Mary Magdalene and the other women made two different visits to two different groups of disciples. Mary Magdalene left the tomb by herself before the angels had appeared. Before anyone had realised that Jesus had been raised, she reported to Peter and the Beloved Disciple. The other women left the tomb after the angels had appeared, and hence, they did know Jesus was raised, and they reported to another group of disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## Introduction

The view that the resurrection narratives are filled with blatant and irresolvable contradictions is widespread among New Testament scholars. One hears statements such as those of Bart D. Ehrman: '[T]here are numerous differences in our accounts that cannot be reconciled with each other' (2006). David Catchpole (2000:40) claims Matthew has 'drastically changed' Mark's empty tomb story. Likewise, C. F. Evans (1970: 28) is emphatic that 'it is not simply difficult to harmonize these traditions, but quite impossible.' Further, it is common to appeal to the presence of contradictions as a basis for arguing that the resurrection narratives are generally unreliable as historical accounts. According to Robert Price (2005:427), the presence of 'gross contradictions' is one of 'many reasons' we have to 'dismiss the gospel Easter narratives as unhistorical.' And Reginald H. Fuller (1980:2) declared: 'the stories themselves appear incredible on the grounds of their palpable inconsistencies.'

The first thing to note in response to this is that most of the alleged discrepancies are confined to inessential matters, and thus, do not cast doubt on the general reliability of the narratives. For example, there are seeming disagreements over how many women went to the tomb, and whether it was dark or light when they had arrived. Even if the gospel writers do contradict each other on these minor points, this hardly leads to the conclusion that the essence of the story (the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb and his subsequent appearances to the disciples) is unhistorical. As an analogy, consider the discrepancies surrounding Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point game. Chamberlain claims he had ten assists that game (1991:190–191), but the official box score reveals he had only two (Burwell 2001:127). Some accounts have Chamberlain scoring his 100<sup>th</sup> point on a layup, while others say it was a dunk (p.

126). When Chamberlain scored his 100<sup>th</sup> point, the crowd rushed onto the court, but some accounts say that the game was called at this point (p. 126), while others claim that the crowd was cleared and the game resumed (p. 126). Hence, irreconcilable contradictions do exist regarding the details of Chamberlain's 100-point game; yet, no one uses these contradictions to argue that Chamberlain's 100-point game has never occurred. Thus, the argument that, because the resurrection narratives disagree on minor matters, they are unreliable on major matters, is a non sequitur. (I am not implying that the so-called minor contradictions cannot be harmonised. I am only arguing that if in fact they are, this does not affect the general reliability of the accounts.) However, here, I will focus on one apparent contradiction which, if it is an actual contradiction, would indicate that the gospel writers do disagree on an essential matter regarding the women's visit to the tomb, and therefore, call into question the basic reliability of the resurrection accounts. I will argue that, despite the initial appearance of the situation, there is in no contradiction present.

## **1. Mary Magdalene's Visit to the Tomb**

It seems that John blatantly contradicts the Synoptic Gospels concerning whether the women at the tomb knew that Jesus was resurrected before they met the disciples. In the Synoptic Gospels, the women arrived at the tomb and meet an angel (or a young man) who tells them that Jesus has risen and that they are to go and tell this to the disciples. However, John wrote that Mary Magdalene returned from the tomb alone. Upon her return, she is not only unaware of Jesus' resurrection, but she tells Peter and the Beloved Disciple that she thinks someone has taken Jesus' body. Peter and the Beloved Disciple then run to the tomb and see that it was empty, but they also do not see an angel.

Hence, in John's account, Mary Magdalene had not encountered an angel at the tomb announcing Jesus' resurrection, while the Synoptic Gospels appear to indicate that she had, indeed, encountered an angel.

Before addressing how this apparent contradiction ought to be solved, the following problem illustrates how harmonisation should not be done. Some have resorted to postulating an extremely improbable scenario in order to avoid admitting a contradiction. The case in point is the suggestion that Mary Magdalene did encounter an angel at the tomb, but she still thought that the body of Jesus was stolen because she was unable to comprehend fully what the angel had said. In the words of Gleason Archer (1982:348): 'She apparently had not yet taken in the full import of what the angel meant when he told her that the Lord had risen again and that he was alive.' But this suggestion is not at all feasible, for the words of the angel at the tomb are unambiguous. If Mary was indeed at the tomb when the angel spoke these words, she could hardly have misunderstood what he meant, and to suggest otherwise is recourse to desperation akin to Eusebius's attempt to harmonise the resurrection narratives by hypothesising the existence of two Mary Magdalenes (see Dungan 1999:109). However, there is a more plausible way of resolving this seeming contradiction. In order to do so, it is important to note three facts.

First, although John's account makes mention of only Mary Magdalene, it implies that Mary had gone to the tomb with at least one other person. Mary states, 'They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don't know where they put him' (20:2). While scholars have offered other interpretations, the clear implication of Mary's use of the word 'we' is that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb with others, but left them at some point in order to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

Second, the disciples almost certainly did not all stay in the same place on Sunday morning. In the gospels, the term, ‘disciples’, is never equated with the ‘Twelve’. ‘Disciple(s)’ is a broad term used to refer to more than just the ‘Twelve’. Thus, whatever their number may have been, there were certainly more than twelve of them. In all likelihood, their number was large enough to safely assume that they were not all to be staying in one place. In addition, Mark and John testify that the Twelve themselves were not all gathered in one place on Sunday morning. This is obvious in John’s account: only Peter and the Beloved Disciple are present when Mary arrives, and only they go to the tomb. Hence, John thinks the other disciples are somewhere else. The same situation is implied in the Synoptic Gospels, which note Jesus saying ‘strike the shepherd and the sheep will be dispersed’ (Mark 14:27). This implies that the disciples would scatter after his arrest. Likewise, Mark 16:7 may imply that Peter was staying separately from the main group of disciples, for it presents the job of telling Peter, and telling the disciples, as two different commands. Thus, there is ample reason to believe, that different disciples, even different members of the Twelve, were staying in different locations on Sunday morning.

Third, Luke indicates that the angels were not at the tomb immediately upon the women’s arrival. According to Luke, it was ‘while they were puzzling over’ (24:4) the missing body that the angels appeared and told them that Jesus was raised. Thus, the women did not know Jesus was raised immediately upon seeing the empty tomb. Rather, for an indefinite amount of time, they remained at the tomb ‘puzzling over’ why the body was missing. Only after the appearance of the angels did they realise Jesus was resurrected. Consequently, there was a time gap of unspecified length; from the time the women arrived at the tomb’ until the time when the angels appeared.

## 2. The Solution

Taking these three facts into account, a plausible reconstruction is as follows: John indicates that Mary went to the tomb with others, and then left. Luke relates that the angels were not at the tomb immediately upon the women's arrival, but rather, the women stood at the tomb puzzling over the missing body for an unspecified length of time prior to the arrival of the angels. If we hypothesise that Mary Magdalene left the tomb while the other women were still puzzling over the missing body, the solution becomes apparent: Mary Magdalene did not know that Jesus was raised, because she left the tomb before the angels arrived. Since the angels were the ones who announced that Jesus had been raised, if Mary left the tomb before the angels arrived, she would not have known that Jesus was resurrected. Rather, as she ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple, she would have still been 'puzzling over' what had happened to Jesus' body, just as the other women (still at the tomb) were doing. Hence, when she saw Peter and the Beloved Disciple, her best guess was that someone had stolen the body. As Mary Magdalene was in the process of telling Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the rest of the women saw the angels, heard that Jesus was resurrected, and then left the tomb. Since different disciples were staying in different places on Sunday morning, and since Mary Magdalene, in her panic, may not have told anybody where she was going, the women went to tell a different group of disciples besides Peter and the Beloved Disciple. As Peter and the Beloved Disciple were heading to the tomb, the other women were leaving. By the time Peter and the Beloved Disciple arrived at the tomb, the women had left.

The following question arises: why would John narrate these events from a very different perspective than the other gospel writers? In order to answer this question, it is important to remember that none of the

gospel writers tried to give a comprehensive account of everything which took place on the morning of the resurrection. One gospel omits what another gospel includes, and in some cases, it cannot be maintained that the writer who omitted an event simply did not know about it. In order to ascertain why a particular fact was included or omitted in a particular gospel, one should rather look at the question in terms of *what would be of interest to which gospel writer*. If the reconstruction above is valid, the following scenario occurred: a group of women went to the tomb, heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and then left. Mary Magdalene left this group of women without knowing Jesus had been raised, and told Peter and John, who then went to the tomb and saw only the empty tomb and grave clothes, without seeing Jesus. It is clear that the most significant event in all of this is the appearance of the angel who announced Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene's departure from the tomb, and Peter and John inspecting the empty tomb, are comparatively unimportant features of the narrative. It is not surprising, then, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke keep their focus on the major event (the appearance of the angel) without 'bothering' to relate Mary's departure to tell Peter and John about the empty tomb and their subsequent return. That series of events accomplished little, and so, it would be an unnecessary digression for the gospel writers.

Why then, if Mary's departure, as well as the inspection of the tomb by Peter and the Beloved Disciple was not of interest to the other three gospel writers, was it of interest to John? This is easily explicable if one considers the fourth gospel's claim to rest on the eyewitness testimony of the Beloved Disciple (John 19:35; 20:24–25). While the events of John 20:1–11 would, for Matthew, Mark, and Luke be of less interest than the appearance of the angel, for the Beloved Disciple, they were of

greater interest, because, unlike the other three gospel writers, he was an eyewitness to those events.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have examined an apparent contradiction between John and the Synoptic Gospels and found that there is, in fact, no contradiction. Although it appears that John and the Synoptic Gospels disagree as to whether Mary Magdalene knew Jesus was raised when she left the tomb, we have seen that this is not actually the case. It turns out, that though the other women knew Jesus was raised when they left the tomb, Mary Magdalene did not know this, because she had left the tomb before the appearance of the angel. Critics who charge that there is a definite contradiction here are being a little too rash in their judgment. In any case of an apparent discrepancy, the text should be examined closely, and possible harmonisations should be explored before charges of contradiction are warranted.

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