

APD10 - ASK PASTOR DON - Sunday, May 31st, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.

“Pastor Don, I’ve always had a very hard time with the different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the gospels. The names of the witnesses at the grave and the number of the witnesses is different in almost every account. I had always been raised to believe the Bible is inspired and inerrant but these accounts have really shaken up my trust in the Scriptures. Can you please explain these discrepancies?”

That’s a great question. Let’s look at the accounts as they stand in the gospels:

Luke 24:1-12 - “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. [2] And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, [3] but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. [4] While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. [5] And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? [6] He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, [7] that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” [8] And they remembered his words, [9] and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. [10] Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, [11] but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. [12] But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.”

Now let’s read Matthew’s account. It’s a bit more condensed:

Matthew 28:1-7 - “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. [2] And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. [3] His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. [4] And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. [5] But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. [6] He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. [7] Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”“

Here’s is Marks account:

Mark 16:1-3 - “When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. [2] And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. [3] And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”“

Finally, John’s record is different again:

John 20:1, 11 - “Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb....[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.”

The main difference in John's account is the way Mary witnesses the empty grave of Jesus in two stages. First she comes and see the empty tomb. Then she runs to tell Peter and the disciples. Then, all alone, she encounters Jesus Himself and has conversation with Him, thinking, at first, that He's a gardener.

So here's what we have in these accounts:

- a) ***The number of witnesses varies in each account - Luke*** had at least five because he names three and adds, "***....the other women....***"(plural). ***Matthew*** has only two. ***Mark*** has three. And ***John*** lists only one.
- b) ***The names of the witnesses are different in some cases - Luke*** lists ***Mary Magdalene, Joanna,*** and ***Mary the mother of James.*** ***Matthew*** lists ***Mary Magdalene*** and the "***other Mary.***" ***Mark*** lists ***Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James,*** and ***Salome.*** And ***John's*** account is unique in mentioning only ***Mary Magdalene*** - twice.

Now our questioner has a good point. There are differences and nothing is gained by pretending the differences aren't there. The real question is just how troubling is this? Are these accounts a threat to our doctrine of the inspiration of the New Testament? And if not, how do we reconcile them?

In 2008 ***Richard Bauckham*** wrote a fabulous study on the resurrection of Jesus called "***Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.***" To this day I think his is the best reckoning of the different accounts of the witness at the empty grave. I have never found a better explanation of these differences.

- 1) ***The writers of the gospel accounts named witnesses known to them personally.*** Because of the importance of the resurrection each gospel writer wanted the testimony used to be weighty and certain. Much like you and I would do, they gave the most credibility to those with whom they had a certain relationship of trust.

We've often said it ourselves - "***If Joe said it, it's true. Joe is as honest and level headed as they come. You can bank on it if Joe said it!***" When we want reliability we go with experienced trust. Relationships matter.

Stay with me here. This is where we see the benefit of ***multiple gospel accounts.*** We know for certain this explanation of the writers selecting the witnesses they knew best is credible because at least the account of ***Luke*** makes it obvious that no account claims to give the names of ***all*** the witnesses. Luke is clear there were "***other women***" along with any who were named. Some sort of selection process is the best explanation for what we see in the various accounts.

But there is another detail in these accounts that is even more relevant for our high view of the trustworthiness of the New Testament:

- 2) ***It is to be emphasized that all of the accounts trace the first testimony of the resurrection of Jesus to women.*** Various scholars are quick to point out that this never should have happened. The testimony of women in that day was given no official status. It was simply not the place of women to be witnesses.

This is an even more potent point in the account of Matthew - the most obviously Jewish of all

the gospel records. Three witness were required under Jewish law and never women. Matthew sites **two** witnesses, both of whom were **women**. Matthew refuses to bend his account to fit the rules.

This is at least part of the explanation for the reaction of the male disciples when these women came with their testimony - **Luke 24:10-11** - **“Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, [11] but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”**

At first we are thankful for the way Christianity, right from its earliest days elevated the place of women in every way. But that’s not the only point we need to notice.

Richard Bauckham raises the real point. ***If the writers of the New Testament were trying to “beef up” their gospels artificially they would never have recorded these accounts as they did.*** There is nothing in these accounts that is easily handled. They don’t have the feel of **“air brushed”** documents. These writers are simply recording things **as they happened** - not the way they were **supposed to have happened**.

If you’re composing a fairy tale you can put it together any way you want. If you have facts to deal with you have to put truth before political correctness or cultural custom. Facts don’t always fit into our minds the way their supposed to fit. Facts can be very stubborn things.

Here’s a classic example of false gospel writing. Not long ago the world was all abuzz with **Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code.”** The novel was all about the way the four gospels we have in our New Testaments were placed there at the expense of more reliable records of Jesus Christ.

Particular mention is given to the **Gospel of Thomas**. The novel placed it on a higher lever than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Now, just listen to how the Gospel of Thomas ends up. Here is the closing conversation between Peter and Jesus: **“Simon Peter said to him, ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’”**

That’s the kind of story you get when the facts don’t rule - when the dominate cultural mind - set creates the story. We should all thank God for the honest rough-and-tumble truth that shapes the gospel accounts in our New Testaments.

So, are there differences in the accounts? Absolutely. But this issue doesn’t cause me to doubt the inspiration of the Scriptures. Far from it. The accounts stand up just as they are. They’re a testimony to the reliability of the Bible I read every day.