



Mary Magdalene at the Tomb: What Was Said and Seen?

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Introduction

The resurrection narratives in the Gospels are among the most scrutinized passages in all of Scripture. One frequently raised objection concerns the role of Mary Magdalene at the tomb—specifically, what she saw, what she said, and the sequence of events. Critics point to differences between John 20, Matthew 28, Mark 16, and Luke 24 and claim that the accounts cannot be reconciled. For example, John 20:1–2 records Mary Magdalene coming early to the tomb and saying, “They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.” Yet Matthew 28:5–6 records an angel declaring, “He is not here: for he is risen.” Luke 24:10–11 records multiple women reporting to the apostles, whereas Mark 16 presents a different sequence of events.

At first glance, these differences appear problematic. However, a careful and structured reading reveals that these accounts are not contradictory but complementary. Each Gospel writer emphasizes different aspects of a complex sequence involving multiple individuals, multiple visits, and multiple interactions. The resurrection morning was not a single, static moment but a series of unfolding events. When these events are properly sequenced, the accounts align with remarkable coherence.

More importantly, the resurrection narratives are not merely historical reports; they are theological proclamations. They demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy, the victory over death, and the validation of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. The role of Mary Magdalene is central in this unfolding drama. She is among the first witnesses, and her experience reflects both human confusion and divine revelation. This passage also reveals patterns of revelation, recognition, and transformation that run throughout Scripture.

The Initial Visit: Darkness, Discovery, and Confusion

John 20:1 states, “The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.” This detail is critical. It was still dark, indicating that this visit occurred before sunrise. At this stage, Mary does not yet understand what has happened. Her immediate conclusion is not resurrection but removal. John 20:2 records her response: “Then she runneth, and cometh



to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple... and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre.”

This statement is often misunderstood. Mary is not contradicting the later angelic message. She is simply reporting what she perceives at that moment. She sees the stone removed and assumes that the body has been taken. This reflects a natural human reaction in the absence of complete information. It also demonstrates that the resurrection was not initially expected, even by those closest to Jesus. Despite His prior predictions, the disciples had not fully grasped the reality of His resurrection.

It is also important to note that Mary’s statement includes the phrase “we know not where they have laid him.” This indicates that she was not alone. Luke 24:10 confirms that multiple women were involved: “It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them.” This plurality is essential for harmonization. The Gospel writers sometimes focus on Mary Magdalene individually, while other times they refer to the group. This is not a contradiction but a matter of narrative emphasis.

The Visit of the Other Women and the Angelic Message

While Mary Magdalene runs to inform Peter and John, the other women remain at the tomb or arrive there. Matthew 28:5–7 records that an angel addresses them: “Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen.” Mark 16:5–6 similarly describes a young man in white declaring the resurrection. Luke 24:4–7 mentions two men in shining garments who remind the women of Jesus’ words.

These accounts are not contradictory but cumulative. The presence of one angel does not exclude the presence of another. The Gospel writers may focus on the primary speaker or the most prominent figure. The essential message is consistent across all accounts: the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen.

The women are instructed to go and tell the disciples. Matthew 28:8 says, “And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy.” This mixture of fear and joy reflects the overwhelming nature of the event. The resurrection is both terrifying and glorious. It disrupts expectations and transforms understanding.

At this point, Mary Magdalene is not present for the angelic message, as she has already gone to inform Peter and John. This explains why her initial report differs from the later



proclamation of the resurrection. She is operating with incomplete information, while the other women have received direct revelation.

Peter and John at the Tomb

John 20:3–8 describes Peter and John running to the tomb after hearing Mary’s report. John arrives first but waits; Peter enters and sees the linen clothes. John then enters and believes. This moment is significant because it marks the beginning of understanding among the disciples. However, John 20:9 adds, “For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.” Their belief is still developing. They recognize that something extraordinary has occurred, but they do not yet fully comprehend the resurrection.

After inspecting the tomb, the disciples return home. John 20:10 states, “Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.” This leaves Mary Magdalene at the tomb, setting the stage for her personal encounter with the risen Christ.

Mary Magdalene’s Encounter with Angels and Jesus

John 20:11–13 describes Mary standing outside the tomb, weeping. She looks inside and sees two angels, one at the head and one at the feet, where Jesus’ body had lain. They ask her, “Woman, why weepest thou?” She responds, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.” This repetition of her earlier statement reinforces that she still does not understand the resurrection.

John 20:14–16 then records her encounter with Jesus: “And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.” He asks her the same question, and she, supposing Him to be the gardener, asks if He has taken the body. It is only when He calls her by name—“Mary”—that she recognizes Him. This moment is deeply personal and theologically rich. It reflects the principle found in John 10:3: “the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name.”

This encounter resolves Mary’s confusion. Her earlier statement that the body was taken is not a contradiction but rather a stage in her understanding. The progression from confusion to recognition mirrors the broader experience of the disciples.

The Sequence of Events Harmonized



When the accounts are placed in sequence, the events unfold as follows. First, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb while it is still dark and sees the stone removed. She runs to inform Peter and John, assuming the body has been taken. Meanwhile, other women arrive or remain at the tomb and encounter angels who announce the resurrection. Peter and John then visit the tomb, observe the empty grave, and depart. Mary remains, encounters angels, and then meets the risen Jesus.

This sequence resolves the apparent contradictions. The differences in the accounts arise from selective reporting and differing perspectives, not from conflicting facts. Each Gospel writer emphasizes particular aspects of the event, but the overall narrative is consistent.

Typology and the Pattern of Revelation

The resurrection narrative reflects a pattern seen throughout Scripture. Revelation often comes in stages. Initial perception is incomplete, followed by clarification and full understanding. This pattern appears in the story of Joseph, where his brothers do not recognize him until he reveals himself. It appears in the Emmaus road account in Luke 24:31, where the disciples' eyes are opened. It appears here in Mary Magdalene's experience.

Mary's initial confusion parallels the human condition. Without divine revelation, the events of God's plan are misunderstood. The empty tomb, by itself, does not produce faith. It requires interpretation. The angelic message and the personal encounter with Jesus provide that interpretation. This underscores the necessity of revelation in understanding divine truth.

There is also a pattern of reversal. The tomb, a place of death, becomes a place of life. Mourning turns to joy. Confusion turns to clarity. This reflects the broader redemptive theme of Scripture, where God transforms situations in unexpected ways.

The Role of Witness and Testimony

Another important aspect of the narrative is the role of witnesses. Mary Magdalene becomes one of the first to testify to the resurrection. John 20:18 states, "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord." This is significant because, in the cultural context of the time, women's testimony was often undervalued. Yet the Gospels consistently present women as primary witnesses to the resurrection.



This detail supports the authenticity of the accounts. If the narratives were fabricated, it is unlikely that the authors would choose women as the primary witnesses. Instead, this reflects the historical reality of the events. It also highlights the inclusive nature of the Gospel, where the significance of a witness is determined by truth rather than social status.

Conclusion

The differences in the resurrection accounts concerning Mary Magdalene do not constitute contradictions. They reflect the complexity of the events and the distinct perspectives of the Gospel writers. When the accounts are harmonized, they present a coherent and compelling narrative.

Mary Magdalene's experience moves from confusion to revelation, from sorrow to joy, and from misunderstanding to proclamation. Her initial statement about the body being taken is not an error but a stage in her journey. The subsequent angelic message and personal encounter with Jesus provide the full picture.

The resurrection narratives, therefore, demonstrate both historical reliability and theological depth. They reveal the fulfillment of prophecy, the victory over death, and the transformative power of divine revelation. Far from undermining the credibility of the Gospels, the differences in the accounts enhance their richness and authenticity, pointing to a unified truth that transcends individual perspectives.