

Who Saw What at the Empty Tomb?

April 8, 2011

Who Saw What at the Empty Tomb? In responding to this issue, it would be helpful to look at the events in the four accounts (see chart below).

Event	Mt 28:1-8	Mk 16:1-8	Lk 24:1-10	Jn 20:1-8
When?	at dawn	just after sunrise	very early in the morning	while it was still dark
Who comes first?	Mary Magdelene and the other Mary	Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome	Mary Magdelene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others	Mary Magdelene
What do they find?	earthquake, angel rolls back the stone	stone rolled away	stone rolled away	stone removed from entrance
Whom do they see?	angel sitting on the stone	young man in white robe, sitting on the right	two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning	no one

What then?	guards report to chief priests and are bribed	---	story of two disciples on Emmaus road	Mary sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been
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When we examine these four accounts, we notice some similarities and some divergences:

1) *All agree that the events happened around dawn, although they disagree about whether it was already light.*

2) *All agree that Mary Magdalene was at least one of the ones discovering that the body had disappeared, with Luke, who has a special interest in women, noting the most women.*

3) *All agree that the women find an open and empty tomb, with Matthew perhaps implying that they also saw the opening of the tomb.*

4) *All agree that the women saw one or more angels (only Luke has two). What the angels say also differs, although in all cases the women are informed that Jesus is not there. They are told not to fear, to report to the disciples, and to meet Jesus in Galilee.*

5) *All agree that the women left the tomb, and three of the four accounts note that they did inform the disciples (Mark breaks off with verse 8).*

What can we conclude from this data? First, if we merge the accounts, it is possible to construct a single, coherent story; however, we cannot be sure that we have all the pieces. The NT places a premium upon eyewitness testimony, and not every witness has to report all of the details another

mentions. In other words, these are different stories but not necessarily conflicting stories.

Second, these stories are exactly what one would expect to discover after a significant event like the resurrection. F. F. Bruce, the renowned NT professor at Manchester University, tells the following story: “The chancellor of this author’s university died at the end of an address to the student body. Within an hour of the event a sociology professor had his thirty students each write down their own account of what had happened. Each was instructed to write as honest and detailed account as they could, given the limited time of the class period. When the accounts were later compared, there were numerous differences in detail, although all agreed that the chancellor had died at the end of his address. Presumably each Gospel writer had a series of stories about the resurrection to sort through... The Evangelists selected and combined data to get the accounts that they give us. But even the beloved disciple in John is not an eyewitness of most of the events, so we are not surprised to find a lot of differences in their reporting what happened.”

— *Bruce Corley, president of the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute*