

# The Apologetics of Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts In View of the Hiddenness of God

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In his first letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul rightly calls the resurrection of Jesus a matter of “first importance” (ἐν πρώτοις)<sup>1</sup> – nothing short of the foundation of our Christian faith. If Christ is not raised physically from the dead, then not only is the Christian faith useless, but our worldview as Christians quickly crumbles. Our entire Christian worldview rides on our belief that on the third day Jesus rose bodily from the grave—he lives! The events of Easter day: the discovery of the empty tomb and Jesus’ appearances to the disciples form the foundation of Christian belief that he “was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, a closer examination of the resurrection accounts establishes the resurrection as the efficient cause of the Church. What else accounts for the transformation of the eleven disciples cowering in the Upper Room in fear on Sunday evening of Easter into bold witnesses and apostles for the truth? They had seen the risen Lord Jesus.

With so much riding on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, it is puzzling, if not problematic that we do not have a fuller, clearer account of the events of Easter in the texts of the canonical Gospels. If the resurrection of God’s Son stands as the central truth of Christianity, and of our peace with God, why do the texts seem so difficult to piece together? Why did God not allow for witnesses of the resurrection itself? More importantly, why are the only reliable, historical records of this world-changing event—the canonical Gospels—seemingly so incongruent with each other regarding the details of the resurrection? Perhaps it seems that if Thomas can demand visible proof of the resurrection, to touch examine the nail marks in Jesus’ hands and put his finger in his side, modern Christians could demand the historical record in the Gospels at least be in harmony.

Since the Enlightenment the historicity of the resurrection accounts face an even greater challenge. Rationalism, modernism and in particular the historical critical method of biblical interpretation have proven to be even greater opponents to the biblical text. These opponents gloat over the “contradictions and mythological elements” they claim have corrupted the historical Jesus. To be sure, there are difficulties in finding a harmony of the resurrection accounts, as we will investigate. We might point out that the objections of the historical biblical critics to the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead have little to do with the perceived flaws in the text. If in his wisdom the Lord had had given us only one Gospel instead of four, or if all four had written precisely the same words, the charge would essentially be the same: “Collusion! Forgery! Prearranged details! Unworthy of any trust!” As one well-known Lutheran commentator, F. W. Wenzel puts it, “The real set of their opposition to the story is not any contradiction in the recording of the details; the heart of their enmity is the story itself, the fact that Jesus arose from the dead.”<sup>3</sup> Wenzel has hit the nail on the head that their *a priori* presuppositions and theology necessarily drives any attempt to harmonize or “demythologize” the resurrection accounts.

The question we face, then, is whether we can resolve these seeming contradictions? Can we find a way to harmonize the details of the resurrection accounts and smooth over the inconsistencies and tensions between them? Can we present a clear picture of what happened on Easter Sunday from the discovery of the empty tomb through the appearances of the risen Christ? This paper will seek to answer these questions. They are not new questions. And at the start, it is worth pointing out these are not questions of isagogics, but of apologetics. Any attempt to harmonize the resurrection accounts is at its core an effort to defend the biblical text—thus an argument in apologetics. You can

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:4b. New International Version, 1984 edition. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages are from the NIV 84.

<sup>3</sup> Wenzel, F.W. *The Wenzel Commentary*. Bemidji, Minnesota: Arrow Printing. 1986 pg. 773.

find volumes written attempting to understand, harmonize and analyze the resurrection accounts found in the Gospels. Nearly every major Christian apologetics text of the late 20th Century until now has a chapter, if not an entire section devoted to the resurrection. And for good reason—we still hold the historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead is the founding fact of Christianity.

Where I see confessional Lutheranism having something to add to the discussion—and which is thus the real aim of this paper—is in the follow-up question to “can we harmonize the resurrection accounts?” That question is “Do we need to?” Here, I believe we do have something unique to say as we find the narrow Lutheran middle road between the unfounded speculation of the historical biblical critics and the arguments of the Evangelicals who overstate what apologetical arguments can prove. Instead, we will see how viewing the resurrection accounts through a theology of the cross, namely the hiddenness of God, allows us to put our faith in the risen Christ and in the accounts God has preserved for us in the Gospels.

## **I. Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts?**

### **A. The apologetical challenges of harmonizing the resurrection accounts**

From the moment of Jesus’ death there is a distinct shift in perspective in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. While the Gospels follow Jesus and seem to share the story of his ministry and Passion through his eyes, the resurrection accounts all shift the perspective to that of the disciples. In his wisdom the Holy Spirit did not inspire any of the four evangelists to record for us the events in Joseph’s new-hewn tomb. How did Jesus come to leave the tomb? Where did Jesus go? When exactly was the descent into hell? Scripture offers no answer.

Instead, from the resurrection of Jesus onwards into Acts, we follow the experiences of the early church. Very early in the morning, while it was still dark John tells us, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. She was joined by other women. They were going there to anoint Jesus’ body with spices and pay their final respects. Had they succeeded in doing this, Jesus would be a footnote in history instead of our Saviour, Messiah. Instead something else happened. Jesus was not there. His body was gone. He is risen! And without a doubt, Mary was one of the women to discover the empty tomb. She saw the angels and heard their message. She reported this to the disciples. She saw the risen Lord in his singular appearance to her. After this, however, the timing and synchronism of how events unfolded gets tricky.

The Synoptic Gospels clearly describe that Mary went to the tomb with other women and that she looked into the tomb with them. They found it empty and were greeted by the angels. The Synoptic Gospels also lead us to assume Mary was with the other women when they saw Jesus<sup>4</sup> and reported the news to the disciples.<sup>5</sup> However, John’s Gospel adds more details as John reports that Mary fled the tomb upon discovering that it was empty to report the news to Peter and John.<sup>6</sup> He also adds that she returned to the tomb and discovered the angels on her own and then saw Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Mark 16:9 also tells us that Mary saw Jesus first, and implies that she was alone.<sup>8</sup> Reconciling the events and their sequence proves to be perhaps the greatest challenge to the resurrection accounts. Taken on their surface, it seems the accounts force us to posit that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb twice, saw the angels twice, and at least the first time did not believe the message or report it, or—as the historical critics would like us to admit—the accounts are simply inaccurate—contradictory. Enter the apologetic task of harmonization.

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<sup>4</sup> Matt 28:9,10

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:9-11

<sup>6</sup> John 20:2

<sup>7</sup> John 20:10-18

<sup>8</sup> Mark 16:9 – As interesting as it might be to study the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20, that topic goes beyond the scope of this paper. Since it is a recurring issue, I will trust these verses belong in the text, unless the apologetic arguments demand we cannot include them.

## Harmonizing is apologetics

The classic locus for ἀπολογία is 1 Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer (ἀπολογία) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” The NIV (1984) translates ἀπολογία as “give an answer”—which is essentially what attempts to harmonize the resurrection accounts are—an answer to the tension between the texts and the historical questions raised by them. The apologetics of harmonizing the Gospels answers the biblical critics who reject the resurrection by showing the evidence we find in the Gospels and other sources supports the reality of this supernatural event as historical fact. In his senior thesis at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Rev. Luke Thompson aptly defines apologetics today as, “by and large an analysis of the data in the world pertaining to Christianity. The Lutheran theologian, though...is not primarily interested in data (although this is of enormous importance, just not primary), but rather what might be the proper use in employing the data.”<sup>9</sup>

What makes answering our question, “Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts” so challenging is that the Gospel writers did not write their accounts—including the resurrection accounts—as evidence or a legal deposition, such as one might find in a modern investigation into the facts of a situation. They wrote with a different purpose, primarily to describe the events of Easter Sunday. Some of what they wrote served apologetically to testify to the risen Savior, (perhaps the clearest example of this is Matthew’s description of the Jewish attempt to blame the empty tomb on the disciples stealing the body). However, the evangelists did not find it necessary to record every detail; Luke’s, in particular, felt it acceptable to condense or summarize the events without concern for timelines.

It would not be fair to the biblical accounts to treat them like testimony given in court where attorneys have opportunity to cross-examine the witnesses. It would be more accurate to describe the Gospels as four separate accounts that describe what happened, much like witnesses of a car accident might offer four different perspectives. (Although even this analogy limps as a police officer taking a statement might ask for more details.) This demand for more evidence (and a prejudice against the supernatural) led biblical critics to place anachronistic demands on the Gospels in order to believe them as authentic testimonies of the events of Easter.

## Defining our Terms: Inconsistency vs. Tension vs. Contradiction

Unsurprisingly, Christians have long handled the dilemma of dealing with the differences between the resurrection accounts through the use of harmonies. Any harmony of the Gospel, and in particular the resurrection accounts, aims to resolve apparent contradictions within the parallel texts. If our hope is somehow to be able to resolve these apparent contradictions by use of harmonization and apologetics, defining what constitutes a contradiction becomes important.

Considering that the inerrancy of Scripture requires, to a certain extent, that the tension between apparent contradictions be reconciled, we will use the following working terminology: We will use the term *inconsistency* to describe situations that are most often called “apparent contradictions,” or “seeming disagreements” between parallel accounts that are fairly easy to explain.<sup>10</sup> A good example of this might be the number of angels that appeared at the tomb. Mark mentions one; Luke says there were two. The inconsistency can be easily resolved if we point out that Mark may have mentioned only the angel who spoke; there could have been two angels present. We will use the term

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<sup>9</sup> Luke Thompson, “An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Senior Thesis*, 13 March 2013. Rev. Luke Thompson in his senior thesis at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary lucidly writes about the lack of Lutheran voices in the field of Christian apologetics and demonstrates the need for us to contribute to this field especially through the theology of the cross.

<sup>10</sup> William Lane Craig, “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig.” *YouTube Video of the Debate at College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts*: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhT4IENSzac>> See clip at 15:10. Craig makes the observation that inconsistencies in the details of the texts are apparent contradictions that are of a secondary nature, not potentially damaging to the heart of issue. How many women were at the tomb does not affect the core fact that the tomb was empty.

*tension* to describe situations where the Gospel accounts remain in “seeming disagreement” unless we resort to using conjecture to offer possible solutions to the specific problem—for example, we might not be able to resolve whether the angel was sitting on the stone as Matthew describes, sitting in the tomb as Mark describes, or appearing suddenly standing next to the women as Luke describes. We may offer some solutions: perhaps Matthew’s angel that scared away the guards disappeared before the women arrived so as not to scare them. Perhaps we can explain that when Luke used the aorist verb ἐπέστησαν “they stood” from ἐπίστημι the nuance of understanding in the form is that they suddenly appeared; they were not necessarily standing up. This seems to resolve the *tension*, but we cannot be sure that our interpretation is correct.

The term *contradiction* can therefore only be a disagreement between the texts that cannot be resolved either through examination of the texts or use of conjecture. It is two propositions that are mutually exclusive, so that holding to one necessitates the negation of the other and vice versa. For example, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the number and location of the angel messengers differently; they are not necessarily in contradiction. Mark describes one man dressed in white, and Luke two men dressed in white. A contradiction would be indicated between Mark and Luke if Mark had specified that there was only *one young man sitting by himself* in the tomb instead of two.

These terms have direct bearing on the inerrancy of the Scriptures. We hold to Jesus’ teaching in John 10:35, “The Scriptures cannot be broken,”<sup>11</sup> and confess with Luther his steadfast belief in the infallibility of the Word, “It is not man’s word, which could lie and be wrong; it is the Word of God who is the eternal truth. My reason is too limited to comprehend it, and in such matters I am a veritable simpleton.”<sup>12</sup> We cannot accept that the texts stand in *contradiction* with each other, so that they are truly irreconcilable in presenting even the details of the resurrection. If Luther considered himself a “simpleton” in discerning the apparent contradictions of the Gospels, a great deal of humility and caution is needed in trying to wrestle with the issues of the resurrection account so they stand resolved as inconsistencies or tensions. We simply were not there and cannot be certain that our resolutions are accurate.

### **The Senses of “History”**

A second definition we need to establish is the term “history.” By “historical” we believe the resurrection accounts are not mere Bultmannian “spiritual understandings” of a resurrected Jesus, but that they declare his physical, bodily rising from the dead in time. As an event of history we must address what the Gospels say and do not say in terms of historical data.

Evangelical scholar N.T. Wright outlines in his *The Resurrection of the Son of God* that we need to recognize five different senses of the word “history” or “historical”:<sup>13</sup>

1. There is history as an *event*. Ultimately the claim of the Scriptures and our claim is that what happened on Easter were actual events in actual time involving real people, real angels, and real places.
2. There is history as *significant event*. Wright suggests the adjective “historic” is apt to describe these events as being noteworthy enough that future generations should know them.
3. There is history as a *provable event*. For example, we might compare the resurrection of Jesus witnessed by the appearances of Jesus to the disciples and women, events which form the basis of Christianity versus the claims of Islam that the prophet Muhammad was transported during the *Isra* by the angel Gabriel to visit the mosque in Jerusalem one night in AD 620. By its very nature, the story of Muhammad’s visit is beyond any such historical probity.
4. There is history as *writing-about-events-in-the-past*. This naturally includes the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, both in terms of their content and their origin.

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<sup>11</sup> John 10:35b

<sup>12</sup> LW AE 23:95.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, pg.s 12-13.

5. There is history in terms of what *modern historians can say* about the events. Wright sees this as a combination of senses 3 and 4, which limits the ability of historians like him to make definitive judgments on whether events happened in a provable, scientific way. The highest level of certainty a historian can reach is classified as “a high degree of probability”—that the evidence points convincingly in favor of this conclusion, but cannot be absolutely certain.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the distance between ourselves, trapped in sense 5, and the historical event in sense 1, it is just as impossible for us to “prove” the resurrection, as it is for the Bultmanns and Bart Ehrmans of the world to disprove it. We become bogged down in arguing about the Gospel texts (sense 4) and can only say limited things in terms of sense 3, which constitute proof. In his book, N.T. Wright approaches the question of the resurrection without requiring faith in miracles, or citing the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Yet he comes to the conclusion that the bodily resurrection of Jesus offers not just the highest degree of probability, but the only explanation for the “empty tomb plus appearances” of Jesus and the sudden development of the Christian faith.<sup>15</sup> We should note that in apologetics (producing harmonies or using other methodology) justifying our positions through faith and the doctrines of the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture are not admissible in the court of human reason, under which apologetics must operate. Our faith rests in the Gospel writers (sense 4) accurately describing the historical event (sense 1) without errors by inspiration from God. However, we cannot appeal to this to make our case.

Understanding the limits of history, and what can be historically stated is quite valuable when it comes to dealing with the speculative nature of the historical critics as well as the conjecture and over-statements that Evangelicals push to “prove” the resurrection. We may allow the Gospels to stand even with inconsistencies and tension between the texts, but this does not shoot holes in our doctrine of inerrancy. The Gospel writers are only responsible for accurately describing the event (sense 1) itself, and what they state, we believe is fact (sense 3). They were not writing exhaustive depositions of every detail, but offering their individual accounts to serve the individual purposes they had in writing their gospels, by inspiration of the Spirit. We remain three layers removed from the event: the event itself, the original Gospel texts as testimony, and the transmission of those texts. The same however, can be said of all attempts to harmonize or comment upon the Gospel accounts. Ultimately, however, we do not believe Christ because we have an inerrant Bible, but know that because we have Christ, we have an inerrant Bible.<sup>16</sup>

## Two types of harmonies

Since the days of the early Church, Christians have tried to harmonize the four Gospel accounts to resolve the challenges between the texts. In general we can find two approaches to harmonizing the texts, each of which naturally has strengths and weaknesses. For a working terminology, I will call them *textual harmonies* and *harmonized commentaries*. A *textual harmony* tries to mesh the text by cutting and pasting the actual text into a harmonious, continuous, new Gospel text. Most of us are familiar with this approach reading a harmony of the Passion accounts during Lent. A *harmonized commentary* allows the texts to stand side by side while offering comparative insights in an attempt to explain the differences.

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<sup>14</sup> Becker, Siegbert. “The Historical Critical Method of Bible Interpretation,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, n.d., <<http://www.wlsessays.net/node/113>>, pg. 7. Becker gives an overview of the historical critical method and points out the inability for this research to ever reach definitive conclusions. A “high degree of probability” is the highest rating a historian may give in terms of his confidence in the historicity of a particular event.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Wright sides with us in his belief in the physical resurrection, with as convincing a statement as he feels he is academically able to make. He concludes: “In terms of the kind of proof which historians normally accept, the case we have presented, that the tomb-plus-appearances combination is what generated early Christian belief, is as watertight as one is likely to find.” pg. 707. See also his conclusions on pg. 717.

<sup>16</sup> By this comment I wish to address the “Chicken first? Or the egg?” question—that Christ, who is the Logos, the one who is the author of the inerrant Word must necessarily come first. The inerrant Word is paramount to believing in Christ. Without it we could not have faith in him. Both are necessary, but the author of this Word is the reason we believe it, not the other way around. Those who would argue the opposite, open the door to the secular, biblical critics who would make our faith in Christ dubious on the basis of perceived inconsistencies in the text or claims of transmission errors.

In a sense textual harmonies are very easy to produce, but difficult to make convincing. We immediately must make difficult choices between the texts. We will lose the evangelists' original purpose and individual styles. Inevitably we cannot simply cut and paste the texts together into one harmonious account. The timelines simply do not mesh. For example, we consider how Tatian's *Diatesseron* (AD. 160-175) handles Mary Magdalene. How does she fit into the story? Did Mary see the angels twice? Did she go to the tomb with the first women, hear the message, report it, fall into doubt and so turn around and return a second time? The *Diatesseron* suggests Mary heard the message, ran back to tell Peter and John, then returned the tomb to be greeted by the angels a second time along with her vision of the Christ.<sup>17</sup> Textual harmonies simply cannot smooth over the differences so easily.

The other approach we called harmonized commentaries. With this approach we allow the text of the individual Gospels to stand side by side and offer insights explaining the inconsistencies. The goal in creating a harmonized commentary is to use the texts to outline the order of events based on the evidence, and then to explain these choices. The strength of this approach is in that it allows the parallel texts to stand. However, this approach requires difficult choices: either conclusions must be drawn on the basis of inference and conjecture to harmonize disparate information, or such things are glossed over leaving room for the charge of a contradiction. In spite of the difficulties, harmonized commentaries are both more useful and familiar to us.<sup>18</sup>

Special attention is due at this point to John Wenham's harmonized commentary, *Easter Enigma*. Wenham lived in Jerusalem in the 1940's and published his commentary in 1984. *Easter Enigma* is by far the most complete and thorough attempt to harmonize the resurrection accounts. I have devoted part of the appendix to summarizing his ideas. While most scholars acknowledge his work is a bold attempt to offer a harmonized commentary, few scholars have much use for it.<sup>19</sup> (This may have more to do with their theological presuppositions, than with the quality of his work.)

### **Remembering the Wild Cards: Geography & Biblical characters**

John Wenham's *Easter Enigma* has garnered so much attention because he addresses an oft-forgotten element to harmonizing the resurrection accounts—geography. He reminds us that like the old city centres in places like Europe or modern Jerusalem, the twisty narrow streets “just happen,” that is, they were laid out without the benefit of modern city planning strategies. Most of the disciples and followers of Jesus were from Galilee, and would likely have been unfamiliar with every twist and turn in Jerusalem or even the most direct routes across the city from point A to point B. We can easily conceive how the city's confused layout may well account for Peter, John and Mary not encountering the other group of women coming back from the tomb. The geography factor means it is entirely plausible that the other women were able to look into the tomb, hear the angel's message and begin to head back in fear and wonder, while Mary had in the meantime returned to find Peter and John and then hurried back to the tomb. If one group took one side street to get there, and the other group returned a different way they would simply have

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<sup>17</sup> *Diatesseron*, Sec. 53, vs 1-25.

<sup>18</sup> Many of us are familiar with Albert Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, or Johannes Ylvisaker's harmony of the Gospels, or Wenzel's commentary on a harmony of the Gospels as more Lutheran approaches. These works of course include sections on the resurrection accounts, but they serve more as general commentaries of the events and merely highlight some of the most obvious inconsistencies between the texts. These commentators do not attempt to actually mesh Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into one smoothly written account.

<sup>19</sup> John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1992. Wenham's great academic rival, the archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley, wrote in 1987 (apparently with some knowledge ahead of publication) against this work: “John Wenham has followed [this] procedure in *Easter Enigma*. Wenham's entirely pre-scientific and uncritical method of ‘harmonistic exegesis’ is employed to give credence to a surface reading of the traditions, even to the point of providing surface maps and diagrams showing the disciples' movements over the days of Jesus' death, burial, and the location of the appearances! One only has to count the number of times this author has to resort to the words ‘presumably’ or ‘probably’ in his re-construction of the ‘probable course of events’ to perceive that the book is a somewhat fanciful one which goes well beyond the evidence and thus falls under the judgment of the author's own dictum that ‘forced harmonizing is worthless’ (citing Wenham, pg. 128).” Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. pg. 18-19.

missed each other. Perhaps this helps begin to explain why John lists Mary alone, while she started her journey to the tomb with the other women.

Additionally, Wenham suggests we not ignore the proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem, pointing out that Jesus and his disciples were staying there during Holy Week.<sup>20</sup> We also know from Matthew's Gospel that the Lord and his disciples had spent a great deal of time on the Mount of Olives, in particular the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>21</sup> Wenham suggests that it makes more sense for the disciples to flee from the soldiers in the arresting party in the direction of Bethany on Maundy Thursday.<sup>22</sup> Since we know that John and Peter changed their minds and followed after Jesus, the probability that the rest had fled to hide out in Bethany helps explain why none of nine other nine disciples appear in the resurrection accounts until Easter Sunday evening.

The real challenge to producing a harmony of the resurrection accounts—either textual harmonies or harmonized commentaries—is that no matter what choices we make we must make inferences and conjectures with imperfect knowledge of the geography of the time. When Titus and the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, the Jerusalem of Jesus' day disappeared. There is no way to reconstruct with any certainty the layout of Christian landmarks: the house with the 'Upper Room', the high priest's house, perhaps even where John's house might have been.<sup>23</sup>

We might also call the biblical characters a "wild card" in the sense that we cannot account for their movements. Where were the nine apostles after they fled in the Garden of Gethsemane and prior to Sunday night when Jesus appeared to them in the upper room? To assume that they were in hiding in the Upper Room the entire time is as much a conjecture as Wenham's suggestion—that they had fled to Bethany and returned on Sunday afternoon when they heard the report from the women that Jesus was alive.

We can see that efforts to produce a harmony of the resurrection accounts face more challenges than just looking carefully at the texts and trying to mesh them together. Both textual harmonies and harmonized commentaries walk the fine line of conjecture and speculation to smooth over the inconsistencies and tensions in the texts. When we take the geographical and character considerations into account we also quickly realize there is much more to producing a harmony of the resurrection accounts than the texts in the Gospel accounts.

## B. The challenge from Historical Biblical Criticism

Until the development of the historical critical method in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in all its various forms, the debate over the resurrection accounts dealt with the resurrection narrative. What really happened on Easter? Christian apologetics worked primarily to refute the claim that Christianity was fraudulently started by disciples. Did they steal the body of Christ? Did Jesus merely swoon on the cross, but never really die? Were the appearances a case of mass hallucination? Apologists address these questions and deal with the inconsistencies in the texts through careful commentary. But as William Lane Craig points out in *Reasonable Faith* we need to take care not to ignore how

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<sup>20</sup> Matt 21:17 & Matt 26:6.

<sup>21</sup> Matt 24:3

<sup>22</sup> Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, pg. 57. His point is simple: why would the disciples flee toward Jerusalem when the arresting party likely stood between them and the city? Why would they run toward the city where Jesus' captors were leading him away, especially if they were abandoning Jesus out of fear?

<sup>23</sup> John 20:11 says, "Then the disciples went back to their homes." All of the major English translations render "ἀπὸ τοῦ οἴκου αὐτοῦ" as "[returned] home" though the typical Greek usage for "being at home" was "εἰς τὰ ἴδια". Wenham makes the case that John's family owned a home in Jerusalem on account of his father Zebedee's rather successful fishing business needing a market to sell their fish. Jerusalem would have been an obvious market to sell the fish at, and we know from Mark's Gospel that when Jesus called James and John they left "their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him." (Mark 1:20). Wenham suggests that John may have been familiar to the high priest because he regularly had sold fish to him that had been shipped up from Galilee in barrels. As evidence he cites a 14<sup>th</sup> century source that quotes an early 2<sup>nd</sup> century gnostic gospel, *The Gospel of the Nazareans*, which says, "In the Gospel of the Nazareans the reason is given why John was known to the high priest. As he was the son of the poor fisherman Zebedee, he had often brought fish to the palace of the high priests Annas and Caiaphas." Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, pg. 42. Wenham offers a second possible reason why John may have had a house in Jerusalem, he was of a priestly descent and occasionally in Jerusalem for priestly duties.

modern historical biblical critics have impacted the debate: "Too often Christians today employ an apologetic for the resurrection that was suitable for use against eighteenth-century opponents but is today ineffective in dealing with the objections raised by modern biblical criticism."<sup>24</sup>

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to investigate all of the claims of historical criticism. However, we still do well to touch on where modern scholarship stands regarding the resurrection accounts. The modern biblical critics write best-selling books and articles, write popular blogs making their theories mainstream. They claim expert status. They claim to approach the texts neutrally. They are the opponents against whom we now have to contend, because they neither "neutral" nor "historical." Their arguments are new, but the motive is still a thinly veiled mask for unbelief. This unbelief may hide behind the limits of history, which limits historians to making claims of historical probability. In other words, historians like Bart Ehrman make their case for rejecting the resurrection on the basis of excluding the possibility of a supernatural miracle, as Ehrman says of the resurrection claim: "Because historians can only establish what probably happened and a miracle of this nature is highly improbable, the historian cannot say it probably occurred."<sup>25</sup> All evidence to the contrary, historical biblical critics simply cannot accept the possibility that Jesus rose from the dead.

In one sense the first historical biblical critics were the chief priests, Sadducees and Pharisees who attempted to cover up the resurrection of Jesus in spite of better knowledge because they rejected Jesus as Messiah and not because they did not have sufficient reason or cause to believe he was alive. We recall how they even worried in anticipation of the resurrection, ironically asking to make the case even more sure:

"Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."<sup>26</sup>

For us who trust the integrity of the resurrection texts, the Jewish leaders' cover up only makes the case for the empty tomb stronger. For modern biblical critics the cover up makes no difference; the texts themselves are suspect. The key to debunking the resurrection accounts is not to attack the story, or the inconsistencies (these things are assumed), but to attack the texts themselves.

We may be familiar with source criticism and form criticism as schools of historical biblical criticism, but today redaction criticism is the unbelieving paradigm *du jour*.<sup>27</sup> Redaction critics do not reject form criticism, but they stress how the texts we have were developed and were edited by competing theological communities. Paul's theology differed from John's and Peter's including how their followers may have been influenced by Gnosticism or competing traditions about what Jesus did. For example, redaction critics would point to Luke 24 and his tradition which

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<sup>24</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008, pg. 333.

<sup>25</sup> Ehrman, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig," See clip at 45:59.

<sup>26</sup> Matt 27:63,64

<sup>27</sup> The source critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century explained the development of the resurrection myths by asserting Mark drew his information from a common source called *Q*. *Q* comes from the German word *Quelle* (source) explaining why the Synoptic Gospels share such similar language and content. Matthew borrowed from Mark, *Q*, and a third source called *M*. Luke borrowed from Mark and material similarly from *Q* and another source *L*.

Form critics such as Rudolph Bultmann, of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century focused more on the origin of the texts in their development phase from oral to written history. Their approach was to get to the kernel message of the Gospels, *kerygma* by stripping away the supernatural. When the apostles later claim in the book of Acts witnessing the physical resurrection, they must be mistaken, or innocently deceived. "These are most certainly later embellishments of the primitive tradition. St. Paul knows nothing about them," writes Bultmann, suggesting even Paul's, "...list of eye-witnesses was not put in [1 Corinthians 15] to prove the fact of the resurrection, but to prove that the preaching of the apostle was, like the preaching of the first Christians, the preaching of Jesus as the risen Lord. The eyewitnesses therefore guarantee Paul's preaching, not the fact of the resurrection" (Bultmann, pg. 42). Bultmann and the other form critics were concerned primarily with *how* the believers came to believe in a resurrected Saviour and how these myths developed. It was always assumed, "The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection." Rudolph Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology*, trans. Reginald Fuller. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1941. pg. 39.



insisted the disciples stay in Jerusalem, so that they would be in place at Pentecost to receive the Spirit. They argue this contradicts the command of the angels in Mark and Matthew for the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee.

### The current myth hypothesis

There are dozens of minor variations to the basic myth hypothesis put forward by redaction critics, but the basic hypothesis revolves around discrediting the texts and the development of the resurrection story. The theory starts with Paul's list of witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

<sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The critics point to the inconsistency between Paul's list and the Gospels who list the women as the first witnesses, because Paul's list *appears* chronologically ordered. As one critic puts it, "Paul did not know the Gospel resurrection stories, for the simple reason that they had not yet been invented."<sup>28</sup> As the hypothesis goes, after Jesus' death the early Christians were so shocked by his death that they searched the Scriptures to find passages that might confirm their otherwise unfounded faith in Jesus as Messiah. They had to do this, because First Century Jews did not know of a Messiah who would be "squashed like a mosquito" by the Romans and fail to bring about a Messianic kingdom. They looked at passages in Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Psalm 69, etc., and found what they were looking for: a Messiah who suffered but was ultimately vindicated by God. Thus, the early Christians believed Jesus must be raised.<sup>29</sup> While these critics accept Paul's list of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15, they argue the fact that the list excludes the appearances to the women means the later Gospel accounts fabricated those stories. Moreover, by including himself in the list, Paul shows that the appearances that did occur were spiritual or "phantasmal" in nature because the critics assert Paul's experience of the risen Christ in Acts 9:3 was purely visionary in nature, not bodily.<sup>30</sup>

The desire for Jesus to be risen, and thought of in a spiritual sense, *a la* Bultmann, needed justification. The Markan community improved the oral legends of Jesus' resurrection by reporting an empty tomb when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome went to the tomb and found the angel who told them Jesus was alive.<sup>31</sup> But this account did not go so far as to claim resurrection appearances. It still admitted confusion to what really happened: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."<sup>32</sup> Carnley argues that the women "said nothing to anyone" indicates why it took so long for Christians to point to an empty tomb experience—decades after Paul had written his appearances list.<sup>33</sup> He adds that Mark's intent

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<sup>28</sup> Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988. pg. 130.

<sup>29</sup> Ehrman, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig," See clip at 1:31:30.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* Ehrman makes this claim throughout the body of his argument. Muslim apologist Shabir Ally in his debate with Christian resurrection apologist Michael Liconia also rejects the possibility of the bodily appearances of Christ on the basis of the Acts 9 vision of Christ. In both the original and Acts 22 and 26 retellings of the story Paul does not claim to have seen the body of the risen Christ, so the claim is made. This makes the later claims more dubious as they grow in detail and description of the physicality of the resurrection to "improve the stories of Jesus' bodily resurrection." Shabir Ally. "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Michael Liconia vs. Shabir Ally," *Debate at Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA*, March 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Helms, *Gospel Fiction*, pg. 133. Helms spends a great deal of time arguing that the Gospel writers were really aiming to develop a theology of resurrection by copying the Old Testament story of Daniel in the lion's den. He suggests a number of parallels in Mark and Matthew in particular to this story. "It seems clear that in a literary sense at least, Matthew was right: the account of the empty tomb used by Mark was indeed structured on Daniel's story of the lion's den...The legend grew in Mark's community, or one from which it borrowed, as part of its stock evidence for Jesus' resurrection," pg. 135.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 16:8

<sup>33</sup> Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, pg. 51.

was to show by the man's message, "He has risen! He is not here" meant Jesus was restored to life, but not on earth, rather, "a translation of Jesus out of this world" to another existence.<sup>34</sup>

Subsequently, Matthew's Gospel added the apologetics to a physical resurrection. He changes the man to an angel and adds the first resurrection appearance of Jesus to the women. Most importantly Matthew corrects an apologetic problem, namely the charge that the disciples stole the body, by adding the account of the Jews' attempt to seal the tomb and cover up the story. Thus the earthquake and angel who scares away the soldiers guarding the tomb is an improvement on Mark's man sitting in the tomb.<sup>35</sup> Equally important, critics point to a change in resurrection theology, which made the resurrection more scriptural, appealing to Old Testament theology, chiefly Daniel 12:3.<sup>36</sup>

The Lukan community takes the resurrection story a different direction, building off of Mark. He keeps the description of men telling the women the good news, but adds parallels to Old Testament angelic appearances as the women avert their eyes, to strengthen the idea they were angels. Most importantly, critics point to Luke changing the resurrection appearances from Galilee to Jerusalem so he can prepare readers for Pentecost and the book of Acts.

John's Gospel then seems to be an attempt near the end of the First Century to tie things off—to show the fulfillment of the Galilean appearance prophecies, and counter-act what seemed to be a glaring problem, that is, how the women shamed the disciples in Luke 24:11, "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." John changes the story so that Peter and the disciples believe, while Mary doubts.<sup>37</sup>

There are other variations of the myth hypothesis, but all with the goal to discredit the text by showing that our Christian resurrection theology developed over the course of the first centuries AD into its present form. The redaction criticism argument hinges on demonstrating competing early Christian belief systems among the apostles. They argue that particular communities or figures with centralized authority attempted to change the narrative of the resurrection in their favour. They would like us to believe that the reality is that the Gospel resurrection accounts cannot be harmonized into an overall picture:<sup>38</sup> "Attempts to piece the fragments of the resurrection tradition together, in the manner of the pieces of a jigsaw, so as to produce a single harmonious picture of what is understood to have constituted the Easter event, must be ruled out of court at the outset as a fundamentally mistaken enterprise."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Helms, *Gospel Fictions*, pg. 139.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 142. We will examine the role of Daniel 12 in the resurrection theology in a later section of this paper.

<sup>37</sup> Helms, *Gospel Fictions*, pg. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, pgs. 67-68. I believe Carnley can express this view in his own words, better than me: "The one hundred years of biblical research since Westcott have rendered this relatively straightforward understanding of the appearances rather problematic from a historical point of view. The first difficulty of which we are now aware is that such an understanding of the appearances can operate only by taking a very synthetic view of the traditions. What is understood to have been seen outside the tomb in the days after Easter is reconstructed by harmonizing the traditions into one overall picture. However, as we have already noted, the tendency of biblical theologians right up to the last generation to draw together the various elements found within the pages of the New Testament into one harmonious view of what happened at Easter and on subsequent days is today rejected as no longer possible. One of the most conclusive results of contemporary redactional studies of the New Testament traditions of the appearances, no less of the empty tomb, is that an original nucleus of tradition has been developed during the course of its transmission and that the resulting diversity can be explained by the reference to apologetic motives and concerns along the way; the modification of the tradition is an inevitable by-product of the attempt to communicate and defend resurrection belief in different contexts to different people with different preconceptions and concerns. All this conditions what is said. The diversity of the resulting traditions cannot just be added together to form one synthetic account of what is supposed to have happened at the first Easter so that all the historian need do is turn his attention to the question of truth—to determine whether it is possible to prove that the sum of what is reported in the New Testament sources did happen or not. The systematic theologian cannot proceed on this assumption without putting blinkers which exclude the most firm results of his contemporary colleagues in New Testament studies," (pgs. 67-68).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 18.

## Our knight in shining armour: Literary criticism

Looking through some of the internet websites and blogs that parrot the historical-biblical critics, one quickly notices that the ultimate argument they offer to Christian apologetics for the resurrection amounts to, "Says who?" If they can discredit the Gospel accounts, all the apparent contradictions do not matter. The central issue is the reliability of the texts themselves. Historical-critical methods depend upon employing an evolutionary paradigm of theology:

- 1) Something that evolves: the pre-literary traditions about Jesus' resurrection
- 2) Sequential stages through which it evolves: for example, Paul's list of resurrection appearances, other oral traditions
- 3) A source with power residing in it motivated to see this evolution: Apostolic communities with theological agendas
- 4) An environment for these changes to take place: Markan, Lukan, Matthean and Johannean communities with the centralized authority to see their version "wins".<sup>40</sup>

The entire focus of this strain of negative criticism rejects *a priori* the fact of Jesus' resurrection and is concerned only with theories and scenarios that recreate the hypothesized conditions and strains within the First Century church that allowed for a *belief in the resurrected Jesus to develop*. They manipulate the authors and postulate apostolic communities and their respective resurrection theologies; they theorize about the psychological state of the early believers that support these conditions. But in effect it is somewhat akin to evolutionists who might try to recreate the primordial soup in a lab in hopes of recreating a biogenesis, the process where life is created from non-living matter. It just will not work.

In order to foster these conditions, the pre-literary culture in Christianity needed two impossible conditions: First, the early Christians needed to dispense with the culture of respect for the texts and canons in God's Word that they inherited from Judaism. We know from the Masoretes and especially through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, that respect for the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament was second to none. The scribes of the Dead Sea Scrolls showed the same respect for the text in preserving it letter for letter (even counting the total letters in each book for accuracy) that we see in the Masoretes over 1000 years later. We see similar scribal diligence in New Testament textual criticism following the development and distribution of the New Testament canon. Texts and traditions are not easily changed and redacted. The few examples (chiefly Mark 16:9-20, the resurrection appearances of Mark's Gospel) are well-known and difficult to pass off as genuine. There is simply zero evidence for these redacted texts to have been so manipulated, while there is ample evidence for the Christian scribes to have carefully copied the texts of the New Testament.

A second flaw in the redaction criticism hypothesis is the need for some kind of centralized authority that had the motivation to change the narrative of the early Christian faith. Simply put, who had the power and authority to make such changes to the resurrection stories (let alone to the rest of the Gospels' accounts)? It would be akin to creating a conspiracy story that said President George Bush deliberately attacked the World Trade Towers in New York City on 9/11 and then convincing reputable publishers to print this as fact in the history books. It would take a great deal of centralized authority, not to mention malicious intent on the part of "Matthew", "Luke" and "John" to create competing resurrection theologies and supporting events to corroborate these theologies. Such a view is simply absurd, given the high regard Christians have had for the Word of God. The force of the redaction critics' argument comes from silence and ultimately from a motivation to debunk the resurrection for reasons of unbelief and not objective historical facts.

Over the past few decades, so many conservative Christian scholars have sensed this departure from what is even sound scholarship, in the name of unbelief, and moved towards literary criticism. Literary criticism accepts the texts as they stand and seeks to work backward through the text to see what it can tell us about the author and original

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<sup>40</sup> David Sigris, "Norman R. Petersen's Literary Critical Investigation Presentation Notes," *Personal Email*. 14 April 2014. David refers me to notes from a lecture he presented on the literary criticism approach of Norman Petersen who outlined those four sequences of the historical-critical method at Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, pgs. 1-2.

purpose of the Gospels. N.T. Wright and his work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* fits into this model. His work is widely regarded because he and others in this school of thought perceive that the flaw in redaction criticism is that it *looks through* the texts like a window to see the biblical world behind it. Instead literary criticism *looks at* the texts like a mirror to see how they can illumine the biblical worldview.<sup>41</sup>

Literary criticism is responsible for showing us that the Gospels are too cohesive, too well-structured and driven by specific purposes to be put together by a community drawing material from a variety of sources. Literary critics have rejected the general idea of multiple authorship or community authorship of the Gospels, because of the intricate themes and nuances we see within each of the Gospels. Literary critics have become proponents of single authorship of the canonical Gospels. While we certainly welcome such scholarship that complements our views on the inerrancy of Scripture, we also need to take care because literary critics do not share our views on the inerrancy of Scripture. Perhaps in our analogy about the laboratory, these scholars fit the role of the intelligent design scientists, who accept a created universe—certainly allies, but not on the same page with us.

### Summary of the historical-critical challenges

Within our theological circles it is easy for us to ignore the scholarship of the biblical critics. It is perhaps even easier to get drawn into a debate with the biblical critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries with the false theologies we are aware rather than spend time keeping current with what is being said. Perhaps, it is good for us to keep an eye on what is being said. Matthew certainly shows in recording the Jewish cover-up in his resurrection account the value the early Christians had on debunking their opponents. John's Gospel illustrated how carefully he wrote to counter Gnostic thought in the early church. Perhaps this is an encouragement for us to keep current with our opponent's thoughts so that we may continue to give an answer to those who ask for our reasons to continue to have hope in resurrection accounts of the Gospels.

### C. The Hiddenness of God in the Resurrection Accounts

Pastor Luke Thompson in his senior thesis at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary drew a remarkably simple conclusion about the contribution Lutheranism can make to the field of Christian apologetics, a contribution which has direct bearing on our present topic. He simply pointed out that the theology of the cross, taught by Luther and advanced by Lutheran apologists gives us a remarkable insight into the hiddenness of God. Quoting Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, Thompson helps us see that God presents himself in contradictions to always leave room for faith:<sup>42</sup>

"[F]aith has to do with things not seen (Heb 11:1). Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: 'The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up' (I Sam. 2[:6])."<sup>43</sup>

Applying the theology of *Deus absconditus* to the debate about the resurrection is not only necessary to building a Lutheran apologetic, but to answering the chief question we are considering: Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts? I hope to further the thoughts of Pastor Thompson (who is himself building on Luther) in this section as we

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pg. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Luke Thompson, "An Apologetic of the Cross," pg. 22. When I call Pastor Thompson's observation remarkably simple, I mean this as a credit to him. The best discoveries or ideas are the simple ones, that should seem obvious to everyone, but until that moment no one has suggested. Anyone who wishes to understand this crucial role and contribution Lutheranism can make to the field of Christian apologetics should read his thesis.

<sup>43</sup> LW AE 33:62.

consider how God masks himself not only in the resurrection but also in the accounts of the resurrection. For in doing this, we shall come to a conclusion on this issue that is, I believe, not only unique to Lutheranism but to the wider debate of harmonizing the Gospels about the resurrection accounts.

### **Unbelief and the hiddenness of God**

Near dawn, when the soldiers ran back into Jerusalem, scared half to death by what they had seen and with their tails between their legs, they went to report to the Jewish leaders. Their mission—ostensibly the dullest and most ridiculous of their career, namely, to guard a sealed tomb with the body of a crucified Jew inside, had failed. Not only was the sealed tomb opened and the body gone, but they had witnessed a massive earthquake and an angel coming down from heaven! Not one of them could do anything about it, though they were the most intimidating human force to be reckoned with in all of Judea.

What happened next is perhaps the most blatant and amazing act of unbelief in all of Scripture. To be sure, critics point out that Jesus only appeared to his disciples and not to a more “objective” witness like Jesus’ avowed enemies who had him put to death. These very enemies heard about the empty tomb before even the Eleven found out. The soldiers (who might also count as an unbiased, objective source) were the first to witness the angel and the empty tomb. What more objective sources could we find? Yet, the chief priests and elders would not believe! One could even make the case that these chief priests and elders were the only ones who had remembered Jesus’ prediction that he would rise on the third day and when it happened they still refused to believe! It is simply incredible.

What do we make of this story? The words that come to mind are the Lord’s instructions to the prophet Isaiah, “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”<sup>44</sup> Only hardened unbelief could reject such obvious, unbiased news of the resurrection in the face of better knowledge—but that is just what the chief priests and elders did. We marvel at it, but it should be hardly surprising. Jesus himself says even the miracle of coming back from the dead would not be sufficient to convince unbelievers:

"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' " 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"<sup>45</sup>

What does Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus teach us, if not that people will reject the resurrection even if we could offer them the sort of ironclad proof they demand? Even if archaeologists unearthed a surprising find—the original manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John along with a collection of other unbelieving resources mentioning the crucifixion, burial and reports of Jesus’ resurrection, it would not be enough to convince the hardened skeptics. Bart Ehrman, now an agnostic, says as much in one of his debates with William Lane Craig from 2008,

[Craig] understands that the idea of God raising Jesus from the dead is completely rational, it makes sense. The reason that it’s rational and makes sense [to him], is that he is a believer in God. So of course it makes sense [to him]. So of course God can act in the world. Why not, God does things all the time? There is nothing implausible about God raising Jesus from the dead. Well, that presupposes a belief in God. Historians can’t presuppose a belief in God... Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable

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<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 6:9,10

<sup>45</sup> Luke 16:27-31

occurrence. And so by the canons of historical research we can't claim by definition that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't... It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for establishing as probable the least possible of all occurrences.<sup>46</sup>

The Enlightenment thinker David Hume rejected miracles on principle and biblical historical critics have followed suite ever since, attempting to rid the Christian faith of the supernatural.<sup>47</sup> Like many historical biblical critics Dr. Ehrman rejects the possibility of miracles and the supernatural as a valid explanation of the facts (the empty tomb, appearances and creation of the Christian church). Any naturalistic explanation must be viewed as more plausible than the implausibility of a divine miracle like the resurrection. His views are certainly not unique.

We, however, should not be surprised at how stubbornly unbelief will doubt the resurrection in spite of better knowledge. Even Thomas disbelieved the news of the Ten, "We have seen the Lord!" though he had every reason to believe them as a disciple of Jesus. When members, prospects, students, and contacts question the resurrection, or when we experience deep-seated doubts ourselves this is also nothing new. It was all exactly what Christ himself predicted would happen about himself, quoting Psalm 118:22, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." Jesus' resurrection fulfills that passage as God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name. Yet he still remains a rejected, despised stone—a stumbling block to unbelief, even the kind that still lurks within our sinful natures. Our sinful natures do not want a resurrected Christ. Our sinful natures especially do not want an ascended Saviour who sits at God's right hand and will one day come to judge the living and the dead.

While the general field of Christian apologetics seeks to win over this unbelief through propositions, debates, and lengthy discourses on the evidence, Lutheran theologians have generally taken a dim view of sharing the Gospel armed with reason alone. We have run away from the forum of debate, in part because we are not accustomed to it, but more because we realize that God and his Word cannot be proved in debate. He hides himself. "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel."<sup>48</sup> It is simply recognition of the great divide between sinful people and a holy God and of the utter vanity of human reason, logic or cleverness to reach up and find God.<sup>49</sup>

So instead we run to the cross, the one place where God reveals himself, even though it is still a "masked-revelation." God reveals himself in the Incarnation of himself in Jesus Christ, given on the cross, yet his divinity is still masked by his humanity.<sup>50</sup> It is both a physical hiding and an intellectual hiding, so that the forgiveness of sins and promise of eternal life might come to us by God's grace alone. This is the theology of the cross. We run to the cross and the weakness, struggle, pain and suffering our Saviour endured on the cross, so that we may believe also by faith in his resurrection from the dead. For this alone is the place where we can find God, as Prof. em. Daniel Deutschlander so eloquently put it, "*God remains hidden in and under the cross, in weakness and in struggle, and he chooses to be found nowhere else.*"<sup>51</sup>

God himself wins souls through the proclamation of the gospel in the means of grace. Apologetics serves to clear

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<sup>46</sup> Ehrman, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig," See clips at 1:14:20 and 35:00.

<sup>47</sup> Hume, David. "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, L. A. Selby Bigge, ed." *Modern History Source Book: David Hume: On Miracles*. Fordham University, 1997. Hume wrote in conclusion to a discussion about the possibility of the resurrection of the dead: "The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), 'That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish....'"

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 45:15

<sup>49</sup> See Isaiah 59:2

<sup>50</sup> See Luke Thompson, "An Apologetic of the Cross," pg. 31 – "But the incarnation at the same time is the focal expression of God's hiddenness, really a double hiddenness... So we may speak of a physical hiding, where God reveals himself to the world in the incarnate Jesus while at the same time hiding himself behind his humanity. There is also an intellectual hiding taking place, especially when we speak of the crucifixion. Here we find our Christ the King texts of the pericope, which are really meditations on the theology of the cross, meditations on how everything that took place on Good Friday gave the impression that Jesus was anything but a king."

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000, pg. 113.

obstacles, reasoned objections, to tear down prideful arguments and show that faith in God and his Word is not blind foolishness. But the arguments of apologetics are not preaching the cross. There is no “for you” in apologetics.<sup>52</sup> This does not mean we should ignore or spurn what apologetics has to offer. It means our job as Lutheran apologists is to subordinate reason and argumentation to the cross, by recognizing the limitations of apologetics. In dealing with the present topic this means recognizing the hiddenness of God in the resurrection accounts.

### **The hiddenness of God in the resurrection**

All of this leads us finally to notice what by now should be painfully obvious—God hides himself even in what should be his most glorious moment in history from creation until Christ comes again. God hides himself in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, literally. There is not a single witness of the actual moment Jesus rose from the dead, nor the moment he left the tomb in his glorified risen body. We should not be surprised at this. This is how God shows himself at work all throughout the Scriptures. Yet, no matter how many times we examine the texts it will always amaze us. Why? Why would God do it this way? Why not allow the soldiers, the disciples, the women, all the people of Jerusalem see Jesus walk out of the tomb in victory? For that matter, we might also ask why in his wisdom God chose to reveal the risen Lord to only the women, the Eleven, to the 500, Peter, James and Paul? Why not also to his enemies?

Had God asked for my input, I would certainly have advised him otherwise on this matter—if for no other reason than to settle this historical debate and save all the work of this paper! How many Jews, how many Greeks, how many lost souls who stumbled over the offense of the cross and might otherwise have been won over to the gospel by a more well-attested, witnessed resurrection! How many atheists, skeptics, or unbelievers might have given the gospel more consideration? How many could be saved today, if we only had some archaeological discovery that even the Bart Ehrmans of this world could not ignore?

Ah, but this is precisely the thinking that belies the theology of glory. The theology of glory fails to recall the opposition attacks not the lack of resurrection attestations or corroborating eye-witness accounts, but the simple fact that God raised Jesus from the dead: “The real set of their opposition to the story is not any contradiction in the recording of the details; the heart of their enmity is the story itself, the fact that Jesus arose from the dead.”<sup>53</sup> Even if Jesus had appeared to the chief priests and won them over like Thomas, along with the guards and everyone in Jerusalem, the biblical critics would still write today of the mass delusion that gripped the city of Jerusalem after Jesus arose.

It may seem strange to our human intellect and reason that God should hide himself in the resurrection of Jesus, just as he did in the incarnation, or at the birth of Jesus. God hides even in the moment we would expect him to reveal himself most clearly, so that our confidence in the resurrection ultimately relies on faith in his Word. In fact it is for this very reason that the evangelists wrote down the accounts of the resurrection and included what details they were inspired to include: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).” Jesus himself reminds us that the resurrection will remain hidden, when he implies that aside from Thomas we should all believe in his resurrection even when we do not have the tangible, visible proof we would like: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed

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<sup>52</sup> I have the utmost respect for apologists like Dr. William Lane Craig, who publicly debate redaction critics like Bart Ehrman on a broad range of difficult subjects. In the number of debates I have seen him give, he has a custom of ending his closing statements with a personal testimony, which amounts to the closest thing to appropriating the Gospel to the audience, “When I gave myself to Christ, God became a reality to me. I would simply say, if you are looking for that sort of meaning and purpose in life, look not only at the historical evidence but also pick up the New Testament and begin to read it and ask yourself whether or not this could be the truth. I believe it can change your life in the same way that it’s changed mine.” Craig, “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig.” See clip at 1:27:24.

<sup>53</sup> Wenzel, *The Wenzel Commentary*, pg. 773.

are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”<sup>54</sup> Thus the words of Luther: “Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden.”<sup>55</sup>

### **The hiddenness of God in the resurrection texts**

In light of the fact that today’s argument revolves primarily around the historical reliability of the Gospels’ resurrection accounts, I would also suggest that we take this understanding about the hiddenness of God a step further. The hiddenness of God extends also to the scriptural texts through which God has transmitted this good news to us.

Our faith in the resurrection comes through the revealed Word of God. Yet even this Word of God is a mask of God, a place where he hides himself. God chooses to meet us in Christ the Word made flesh, to speak to us, create faith in our hearts to hear the account of his victory over death and to believe it to our salvation. It is through the message that was inspired by the Holy Spirit and written down by the apostles and evangelists that we have received this Word of God.<sup>56</sup> In God’s wisdom, “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”<sup>57</sup> Or as Paul describes it in the book of Romans, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

God’s Word is a mask, because he hides himself behind the message of the text. Bultmann misused the term *kerygma* to describe the kernel of the Scriptures that speaks that which is God’s Word. I wonder if he did not hold onto that term because he understood what the road to Emmaus disciples felt as the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts as they walked along the road with Jesus. Bultmann ultimately lost the true *kerygma* by rejecting the texts and the truth of the gospel from what might have once been a childlike faith. We, however, cling to God’s Word and understand it is more than just words or ancient text. It is where the Holy Spirit works in our hearts like the Emmaus disciples.

As with the resurrection there is a double mask here. God hides himself in the text, but he also hides behind the text. The original manuscripts of the New Testament, and in particular, the Gospels, are lost to us in history. Just as we cannot lay eyes upon the resurrected body, except by faith, so also we cannot lay eyes upon the original manuscripts. We do not know the exact times or circumstances of their writing. We do not have indisputable proof of their authorship. As we saw earlier in the discussion about N.T. Wright and the senses of history, there is a gap between the original events the Gospels describe about the resurrection, the texts, and us. That gap of history adds a layer on the mask of God, as he hides himself in history and the historical documents, namely the Gospels.

There is a second element to this mask, one that is readily attacked by the historical biblical critics—they attack the Gospels as nothing more than the spiritual thoughts of men. These critics are only too quick to point out the inconsistencies and apparent contradictions are proof of this hypothesis. We have heard the objections modern historical biblical critics have to accepting the Gospels as historical documents, namely, that they demonstrate an evolving theology of the resurrection and numerous fallacies and mythological embellishments. I would argue that issue is really what people are stumbling over: the offense of the Word of God as a means of salvation, just as they stumble over the cross. Unbelief cannot look at ancient texts and perceive that somehow in these documents God is speaking to us. Unbelief cannot see that God could inspire the Gospel writers to write their accounts independently of one another *and allow for the inconsistencies and tensions so that we might believe the texts by faith*. Just as God works through the means of water, bread and wine, so he also works through the means of the human authors of Scripture with all their characteristics, writing styles and word choices.

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<sup>54</sup> John 20:29, also 1 Peter 1:18-21 and Colossians 2:9-12

<sup>55</sup> LW AE 33:62.

<sup>56</sup> 2 Peter 1:20,21

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21

<sup>58</sup> Romans 10:17



This is the heart of the issue when it comes to desiring to harmonize the resurrection accounts. God wants us to believe in the risen Christ by faith apart from sight. God wants us to believe that he speaks to us *through his Word* by faith. God wants us to believe that *we have his Word* in the texts available to us by faith. God wants us to believe that *the texts are his inerrant, inspired Word* by faith in spite of the fact that he gave them through the means of imperfect people.

This is ultimately the modern attack against the resurrection: we cannot trust the text, because the authors had hidden agendas, presented embellishments, myths, and fanciful stories! God does not dissuade them of such thinking by giving us accounts in the Gospels that mesh so tightly together that unbelievers will have to accept it. (And as we have seen, if that was the case, the charge would be “Forgery! Collusion!”) He allows for the inconsistencies and tensions so that we can believe it only by faith.

### **The hiddenness of God and harmonizing the texts**

So how can we call the resurrection accounts inerrant? Jesus reminds us, “the Scripture cannot be broken,”<sup>59</sup> and “Your word is truth.”<sup>60</sup> Inerrancy is an article of faith. It is not an article that can be proved by apologetical arguments, or harmonizing of the resurrection accounts. It is a mask of God, as God hides himself behind the texts, the human authors, the transmission of the Scriptures so that he still speaks to us through the Word when we read it.

Scripture is clear that even though we are reading the texts of the Bible, they are not man’s word, but God’s Word. “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”<sup>61</sup> The Scriptures are clear that God cannot lie, make mistakes, or errors, “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”<sup>62</sup> We confess that there can be no errors in the texts—both in the teaching and in the historical content—but we also must be careful to understand what that means.

Particularly the Gospel texts are not written with an aim of being compared to one another—that the historical details of their stories should match up. If that were the case, the Gospel writers would certainly have closely consulted each other so as not to give the appearance of possible inconsistencies. They wrote to describe and report what happened and how these events may give us faith in Christ. They wrote to describe the events of Easter to the extent they needed to make that spiritual point. Finding inconsistencies and tensions in the resurrection accounts should not bother our faith. We trust that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were faithfully reporting what happened Easter Sunday. We also admit that because we were not there we do not have access to all the details we might like to know. We cannot access with one-hundred percent certainty the events of Easter Sunday (sense 1 – the event) or even prove them through sound reasoning and apologetics (sense 3 – what can be proved) while we stand back looking at everything from a historical point of view (sense 5 – what historians can say).

What apologetical arguments and harmonies can do is to help us try to connect the words with possible historical inferences to resolve the inconsistencies and tensions. In other words, a harmony, particularly a harmonized commentary allows us to make inferences that try to get us closer to the event (sense 1) by looking at the texts (sense 4 – historical documents) and allowing them to illuminate the biblical world. However, these arguments and harmonies cannot go beyond sense 4—we cannot move any closer to the event or prove our theories (sense 3) any more than the historical biblical critics. Some of the conclusions and inferences we draw may be accurate, but ultimately this only shows why the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture is an article of faith, not an assertion of apologetics.

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<sup>59</sup> John 10:35b

<sup>60</sup> John 17:17b

<sup>61</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:13

<sup>62</sup> Numbers 23:19; see also Titus 1:2 or Hebrews 6:18

For example John Wenham in *Easter Enigma* offers a simple yet striking solution to the inconsistencies we find in the four Gospels about the times that the women left for the tomb. Mark reports that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were on their way to the tomb, “very early, just after sunrise” (λίαν πρωΐ... ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου).<sup>63</sup> Whether we translate the aorist participle from ἀνατελλω, “at sunrise”, or “just after sunrise” is irrelevant. Wenham points out that biblical usage of the verb ἀνατελλω means “day break”—thus it is not a contradiction to say “very early.”<sup>64</sup> Matthew reports Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb “at dawn” (τῆ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ);<sup>65</sup> Luke reports they (the five women) went to the tomb “at dawn,” literally “at deep daybreak” (ὄρθρου βαθέως).<sup>66</sup> John’s account is different. He lists only Mary Magdalene and that she went to the tomb “early, while it was still dark” (πρωΐ σκοτίας ἔτι οὐσῆς).<sup>67</sup> His account seems inconsistent with the others, but given what we learned early about geography and character movement the inconsistency is easily resolved.

Wenham suggests that Mary Magdalene stayed in Bethany along with the other nine disciples (who had previously fled there from Gethsemane on Thursday). On Easter morning while it was still quite dark she left with the other Mary for Jerusalem towards John’s house in the city arriving there as it was getting quite light. There they met Salome and gathered their ointments to take to the tomb. Just outside the city gate before arriving to the tomb they met Joanna, and the other woman at a pre-arranged location and time arriving at the tomb as the day was beginning to break in full daylight.<sup>68</sup> This inference resolves the inconsistency in the Gospels about the time of day the women went to the tomb, but even if it is accurate, we have no way of being certain that the details played out as Wenham suggests.

Ultimately, if we believe we can solve the inconsistencies and tensions through harmonizing and insist upon our inferences we are no better than our opponents who speculate and subtract from the texts because they do not see the details lining up either. The inerrancy of Scripture is an article of faith, and a mask of God hiding himself in the texts we confess to be his Word. The deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection, and our confidence in these facts must rest upon faith.<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion – Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts?**

We began this section asking the most basic question to approach harmonizing the resurrection accounts—“Can we?” The apologetic challenges we looked at offer a great deal of insight to unlocking some of the puzzles behind the inconsistencies and tensions found between the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection. In particular, we noted the importance of recognizing the gap in history (the historical senses) between ourselves and the original event of the resurrection. This gap limits not only what we can say, but also what our opponents can do in attempting to undermine the reliability of the texts. While the Gospels give us a variety of perspectives on what took place that Easter Sunday morning, they do not share every detail we might wish. Nor are we able to account for the geographical details and biblical character details which animate this story. Especially because the resurrection accounts shift the

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<sup>63</sup> Mark 16:2

<sup>64</sup> Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, pg. 81.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 28:1

<sup>66</sup> Luke 24:1

<sup>67</sup> John 20:1

<sup>68</sup> Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, pg. 82-83.

<sup>69</sup> Consider Paul’s point in Colossians 2:9-12: “<sup>9</sup> For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, <sup>10</sup> and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. <sup>11</sup> In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” We cannot see the full deity in Christ, though it is present, just as we cannot see the resurrection. The resurrection texts show the hiddenness of God in the same way.

perspective of the Gospels from Jesus to the disciples and believers it leaves us trying to make sense of these inconsistencies.

However, no matter how skilled we are at exegesis, or historical research the inconsistencies and tensions remain because God, in his wisdom, wants us to leave room for faith. Appealing to the hiddenness of God explains why apologists, historians and scholars will never be able to prove the resurrection as a historical event, or even show that it was “highly probable” to use the historians’ parlance. (Serious and faithful attempts have been made, but they ultimately will not win over the historical-biblical critics, including modern redaction critics like Bart Ehrman.) The hiddenness of God shows us ultimately that just as God hides himself in the person of Jesus Christ in his state of humiliation, so he even hides himself in exaltation, including the resurrection. And God will remain hidden, within his Word, through the texts he has given to us until he reveals himself when Jesus returns on the Last Day.

Any attempt to harmonize the resurrection accounts, either through a textual harmony or a harmonized commentary, must take this hiddenness of God into account. Perhaps by using careful exegesis and paying close attention to detail we will be able to find solutions to the challenges in them. So long as our solutions remain faithful to the texts in harmonizing the story into a chronological account they can be a useful tool to teaching the texts or giving an apologetic explanation. In and of itself, such attempts can be a God pleasing way to grow in faith and trust the Word of God. However, the Lutheran apologist should remember that “the goal of Lutheran apologetics [which includes harmonizing the resurrection accounts] is never to show how reasonable our faith is, but rather to point out that the unreasonable did, in fact, take place.”<sup>70</sup>

The general field of Christian apologetics recognizes the limitations we have as Christian historians to harmonize the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Largely for this reason even those who hold a high view of Scripture, and believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus usually will not appeal to harmonies, nor try to create their own. N.T. Wright, William Lane Craig and others generally stay clear of this work, even of John Wenham’s harmony in *Easter Enigma*. They steer clear and avoid building a case based upon conjecture because they inherently understand God is hidden, and therefore the resurrection cannot be proven historically.

Thanks to Luther and the others who have preached Christ crucified and risen from the dead through the theology of the cross, we are able to do more than offer some well-educated guesses. We can point people to the reason *why* God allows the Easter accounts to appear so weak, so human, so impossibly incongruent. We can confess these stories to be true events, reported accurately by God’s grace, and faithfully transmitted to us all within the theology of the cross.

So where does this leave us? Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts or not?

I have tried to argue that a simple “yes” or “no” answer is not possible—the issue is more nuanced. Thus our answer to this question must be as well. We have seen the reasons why we cannot force all the details of the texts into an over-simplified harmony, especially if we cannot even find answers to all the details to make such a harmony.<sup>71</sup> To answer the question with a qualified, “Yes”, we will need to immerse ourselves in an exercise that is akin to giving a flying tour to a group of tourists while flying above the clouds. There are plenty of breaks in the clouds of unanswered questions to point out some details, but until we are resurrected ourselves to eternal life, certainty about the details we point out remains hidden by the clouds. This is the hiddenness of God at work.

This does not mean studying a harmony of the resurrection accounts is worthless. When we share the resurrection story even showing our members the difficulties in the texts, we are bringing them to God’s Word through which God speaks and builds up faith. When we expound these texts, like Jesus did for the Emmaus disciples the Holy Spirit is at work. And harmonizing the resurrection accounts, even with all the qualifying, “maybes, possibilities, perhapses and it-might-be-the-cases” may help some to satisfy their human reason and curiosity about what may have happened. For some members, prospects, even for ourselves harmonizing the resurrection accounts may help us wrestle with the chronology and present the facts of the resurrection more clearly.

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<sup>70</sup> Luke Thompson, “An Apologetic of the Cross,” pg. 37.

<sup>71</sup> See N.T. Wright’s conclusions on this point, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 614.

Ultimately, the question, “Can we harmonize the resurrection accounts?” is not a question where we can find certain satisfaction intellectually or in faith. God in his wisdom gave us four Gospels for a reason. I believe the more important and satisfying question to ask is not, “Can we?” but “Do we need to harmonize the resurrection accounts?” Here, I believe a more certain and satisfying answer can be found. Our last section of this paper will seek to answer this question.

## II. Do we need to harmonize the resurrection accounts?

The apologetics for the resurrection of Jesus we are most familiar with tend to address the story of the resurrection rather than making a case for Gospel texts as they are. We tend to focus on proving the disciples had no means or motivation to steal the body of Jesus. We teach the competence of the Roman soldiers to do their job well—namely that Jesus really was dead, there is not a chance he merely revived in the tomb. We point out the enemies of Jesus had no answer for the empty tomb; they could not produce a body. Their only recourse was to threaten the apostles to stop preaching in Jesus’ name. We can show the folly of the argument that the women and disciples went to the wrong tomb. We are quick to defend the belief of the apostles in seeing the resurrected Lord, namely, that they were willing to die for this truth. No one knowingly dies for a lie. We point out that mass hallucination is not possible to explain their faith in seeing the risen Lord. Nor is mass hallucination possible to explain all the resurrection appearances to all various individuals and groups, especially the five hundred at one time. We can show that resurrection was a shock and surprise to the women and the disciples which transformed their fear into the boldness, and through which the Holy Spirit started the Christian church.

These arguments are all valid and have their place in defending the resurrection of Jesus. What this paper has tried to address are the difficulties raised by modern redaction critics who challenge the texts of the resurrection. Not only do redaction critics point out the apparent contradictions and tensions, they argue for an early First Century development of a resurrection myth through competing religious communities in the Christian church. They theorize that Paul wrote of the first inklings of a resurrection belief; that Mark’s community drafted a legend of an empty tomb; the Matthean and Lukan communities subsequently improved Mark’s story and John went even further.

Our apologetics really must address the attack on the resurrection accounts themselves. Some see harmonizing them as the solution. I have tried to make the case that harmonizing alone is insufficient because it forces us to depend as much upon speculation and conjecture as our opponents in the redaction critic circles seem happy to do. For those who wish for more, and who might want or demand a harmony of these resurrection accounts, might an apologetic examination of the sufficiency of the resurrection accounts on their own actually *strengthen* the case for the historical reliability of the texts? I will try to make the case that it does in the final section of this paper, especially when viewed through the paradigm of the hiddenness of God.

### A. The hiddenness of God in apologetics of the resurrection accounts

It is clear to anyone reading John’s Gospel that he wrote with a purpose of supplementing what the Synoptic Gospels had already given us. He certainly had and took the opportunity to fill in some significant miracles, sermons and discourses Matthew, Mark, and Luke ignored. John very easily could have told us more about the resurrection. He could have told us when Jesus appeared to Peter, James or the five hundred.<sup>72</sup> He would have prevented even more dilemmas by showing how his story with Mary Magdalene meshes with the other three accounts. He could have made the case for the empty tomb even stronger by corroborating Matthew’s cover up story.

He did none of those things.

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<sup>72</sup> Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5

What he did write, and what the other Gospel writers did write of the resurrection, was meant to be for us enough. "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."<sup>73</sup> As we look at how God hides himself in the resurrection accounts as they stand, we see an apologetic for the texts to stand on their own through this theology of the cross.

### **The hiddenness of God seen in the simple silence the texts**

While the historical-biblical critics are quick to point to embellishments and interpretive license that the later Gospels added to the more bare text of Mark, the reality is quite the opposite. As we look at the Gospels and compare them to contemporary non-biblical texts we find the resurrection accounts as surprising for what they *do not say* as much as for what they *do say* about the miracle itself. The dead Son of God returning to life is a miracle, the greatest miracle, the very pinnacle of Scripture. Yet the description in all four of the Gospels is underwhelming compared to the significance of its theological meaning. N.T. Wright observes the steady crescendo in the Gospels building to the resurrection and the sudden feeling that at the resurrection, "...the orchestra has fallen silent. Granted that the evangelists felt so free, as our own scholarly traditions have insisted, to develop, expand, explain, theologize and above all biblicalize their sources, why did they refuse to do so, here of all places?"<sup>74</sup>

We find no exposition of the great meaning of the resurrection, compared to John's concluding thoughts in John 3:31-36 or theological exposition such as Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 or 1 Corinthians 15. The language is simple and straight-forward. The resurrection accounts are not even the most dignified sections of each of the respective Gospels. While the Old Testament stories are replete with psalms of praise to set off the significance of the moment, the resurrection accounts are silent. Think of the song of Moses as the Israelites rejoiced in the Lord's victory over the Egyptians in Exodus 15; Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8; Jonah's song in the fish in Jonah 2; Mary's "Magnificat" in Luke 1; these are a few that come to mind.

This silence stands in contrast to the non-canonical texts in the Nag Hammadi or Pseudepigrapha. The *Gospel of Peter*, although not a Gnostic text itself is part of the Nag Hammadi texts and contains the most complete parallel account of the resurrection. Note the heightened language and tone of the follow excerpt:

"<sup>9</sup> And in the night in which the Lord's day was drawing on, as the soldiers kept guard two by two in a watch, there was a great voice in the heaven; and they saw the heavens opened, and two men descend from thence with great light and approach the tomb. And that stone which was put at the door rolled of itself and made way in part; and the tomb was opened, and both the young men entered in. <sup>10</sup> When therefore those soldiers saw it, they awakened the centurion and the elders; for they too were hard by keeping guard. And, as they declared what things they had seen, again they see three men come forth from the tomb, and two of them supporting one, and a cross following them: and of the two the head reached unto the heaven, but the head of him that was led by them overpassed the heavens. And they heard a voice from the heavens, saying, Thou hast preached to them that sleep. And a response was heard from the cross, Yea."<sup>75</sup>

It is hard not to see the fanciful contrasts between this *Gospel of Peter* and the biblical accounts. The angels coming down and cracking the stone in half; the two angels assisting a revived Jesus out of the tomb; their heads reaching up to heaven; the cross following Jesus and preaching?! And of the Nag Hammadi texts that speak of the resurrection the

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<sup>73</sup> John 20:30,31

<sup>74</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 600.

<sup>75</sup> "The Gospel of Peter - Roberts-Donaldson Translation." *Early Christian Writings*.

<<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelpeter.html>> Accessed 2014. 23 Mar. 2014

*Gospel of Peter* is by far the most biblical sounding.<sup>76</sup> Instead we find the canonical resurrection accounts to be simple, unadorned, straight-forward in telling the facts and leaving the implications to the reader. This is the way God reveals himself in meek, simple, quiet ways: walking in the cool of the Garden to call Adam and Eve to repentance; as wearied travelers at Abraham's tent; in the soft quiet whisper of Elijah's cave on Mt. Horeb; wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Perhaps more striking is the fact that all the Gospels contain at least one statement of the necessity of Jesus' suffering, crucifixion and death, and resurrection on the third day to be fulfilled. The angels speaking to the women in Luke 24:7, "The Son of Man must (δεῖ) be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." Or John's side comment at 20:9, "(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to [δεῖ] rise from the dead.)" We could also add to this list Jesus' predictions in Mark 8:31 or Matthew 16:21 and others. Yet none of the Gospels tell us these prophecies now stand fulfilled. None point us to Old Testament passages, or chime in as so often is the case, "Then what was said through the prophet was fulfilled..." In fact the Gospels leave us to wonder where, aside from Jesus' personal predictions, a prophecy of the resurrection in the Old Testament could be fulfilled at all. Surprisingly it is not just Mark who fails to mention any fulfillments, none of the Gospels do.

A third aspect to the simple silence we find in the resurrection accounts is a lack of any appropriation to the reader in the resurrection accounts themselves. The rest of the New Testament certainly appropriates the resurrection to us, "Because I live, you also will live."<sup>77</sup> "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."<sup>78</sup> "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."<sup>79</sup> As important as appropriating the resurrection of Jesus to ourselves is, the resurrection accounts make no effort to do this. "If Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wanted to tell stories whose import was, 'Jesus is risen, therefore you will be too', they have done a remarkably bad job of it," remarks N.T. Wright, "Instead, we find a sense of open-ended commission *within* the present world: 'Jesus is risen, therefore you have work ahead of you.'"<sup>80</sup> That the resurrection accounts each contain some form of the Great Commission but lack the appropriation of our own future eternal life, or bodily resurrection is evidence to his point.

These are remarkable features that our resurrection accounts *do not say*. We should take pause to consider whether God's purpose in doing this is to not only hide himself further in the story, but also to authenticate the texts by the counter-intuitive absence of explanatory features and elegant language.

### **The hiddenness of God seen in the not-quite-completely-glorified form of Jesus' resurrected body**

As the resurrection texts are themselves written stripped of elegant flair and explanatory features, we could also point to that hiddenness in the nature of Jesus' resurrected body.<sup>81</sup> The nature of Jesus' resurrected body was surprising to the early Christians, and not what they would have expected. Jesus' body is neither merely revived and healed from the crucifixion, nor is he revealed in the state of glory the believers would have expected. The picture the Old

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<sup>76</sup> Compare also the so-called "The Gospel of Philip," *The Gnostic Society Library: The Nag Hammadi Library*. trans. Wesley W. Isenberg. <<http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>> (accessed 23 March 2014).

<sup>77</sup> John 14:19b

<sup>78</sup> Romans 4:25

<sup>79</sup> Romans 8:11 [ESV]

<sup>80</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 603.

<sup>81</sup> To this point, all scholars yield credit to N.T. Wright and his extensive work in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Of his 800 page volume the bulk of the work is devoted to exploring what resurrection meant to a First Century Jew. This research was necessary to demonstrate that when the disciples and early believers experienced resurrection appearances from Jesus, they were not visions or hallucinations, nor some form of thinking that Jesus is risen to life in heaven.

Testament (and Apocryphal) passages paint of the resurrection does not match what we find taking place on Easter. Nor does Jesus' resurrected body necessarily match the experience Paul had with the resurrected Saviour. His vision of the risen Lord in Acts 9, has given the redaction critics fodder for suggesting Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is more akin to what the early Christians experienced in seeing the risen Saviour until the Gospels altered the visions to make Jesus seem more bodily. However, N.T. Wright shows this cannot be the case.<sup>82</sup> Paul was describing a new understanding of the resurrected body that had been previously unknown through Judaism.

In particular the passages from Daniel 12:2-3 illustrate the eschatological understanding the Jews had about the resurrection from the dead and how different the resurrection of Jesus later appears: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." More than any other passage, Daniel 12:2-3 helped to shape the theology of the Jews, regarding the final resurrection from the dead and the glorious nature of the resurrected body.<sup>83</sup> We catch glimpses of this Jewish attitude regarding the resurrected body elsewhere in the Gospel.<sup>84</sup> They underscore for us the surprising nature of the resurrection as Jesus taught it, and visibly showed it in his resurrected state. For example in the resurrection appearances themselves, Jesus took effort to show his disciples the physical, tangible body in which he appeared. The laws of physics no longer controlled his body. He vanished from the sight and appeared elsewhere. His body was sometimes recognizable, sometimes hidden from the believers (e.g., Mary Magdalene's vision in the garden, the road to Emmaus disciples).

What these appearances of Jesus show is that the nature of his resurrection was surprising to the early Christians. The surprising nature of his resurrected body reveals the hiddenness of God. If the resurrection appearances had been written to perpetuate and elaborate the legend of the empty tomb, we should expect the descriptions of Jesus' resurrected body to fit more in line with the Jewish thinking of resurrected bodies. We should expect to find a view of the resurrected Jesus more in line with Daniel 12, or prevailing Jewish thought expressed in the apocryphal writings of the Intertestamental Period. We should expect to see something more in terms of glory, along the lines of John's vision of Jesus in Revelation 1, or Daniel 7:13 and the coming of the "one like a son of man." Perhaps Jesus' body should have had some grandiose feature like the *Gospel of Peter's* description of Jesus, where he his head "overpassed the heavens" (ὑπερβαίνουσιν τοὺς οὐρανοὺς).<sup>85</sup> If the early Christians were trying to invent stories of resurrection appearances, it does not make sense that they should forego a more convincing resurrection glory. Nor does it make sense for the first Christians to dramatically alter the accepted views of resurrection theology, unless Jesus' resurrection really altered their views. His resurrection changed their understanding of resurrection because it was dramatically different than what they had expected.<sup>86</sup>

So we find once again an apologetic that appeals to the hiddenness of God must leave room for faith. As Prof. Deutschlander concludes: "Even for those who saw him after his resurrection, the view of his glory was a fleeting one.

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<sup>82</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, see chapters 5-8. N.T. Wright shows demonstrably in this middle section of his book Paul's theology of the resurrection could not be the basis around which the Christians could build myth stories of a resurrected Saviour. Paul's understanding of the resurrected body is shaped by Jesus' resurrected body not the other way around.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 109: "The text which became central for much later Jewish thought on this subject is Daniel 12:2-3. Though it is almost certainly the latest of the relevant passages, there are three good reasons for starting with it. First, it is the clearest: virtually all scholars agree that it does indeed speak of bodily resurrection, and mean this in a concrete sense. Second, it draws on several of the other, probably older, relevant texts, showing us one way in which they were being read in the second century BC. Third, conversely, it seems to have acted as a lens through which the earlier material was seen by subsequent writers. To read Daniel 12, is thus to stand on the bridge between the Bible and the Judaism of Jesus' day, looking both backwards and forwards, and watching the passage of ideas that went to and fro between them." Wright goes on to illustrate how Daniel 12:2-3 influenced the theology of the Intertestamental Period, in particular influencing Jewish thought among the Pharisees, Sadducees and the common people regarding their resurrection hopes.

<sup>84</sup> For example compare Martha's views of the resurrection she expresses to Jesus at the death of Lazarus in John 11:24: Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

<sup>85</sup> "Gospel of Peter - Greek text version from Bouriant." *Early Christian Writings*. (accessed 23 April 2014).

<sup>86</sup> We have not discussed the issue that Jesus appeared different to the disciples, or that they were kept from recognizing him. Mark 16:12 reminds us Jesus appeared, "in a different form" (ἐν ἑτέρῳ μορφῇ) in reference to the Emmaus disciples. Perhaps it indicates his appearance had changed that made it difficult for the believers to recognize him at first. We can only speculate.

Since his ascension, that triumph remains hidden in the Word and is seen only by the eyes of faith.”<sup>87</sup> Even the nature of Jesus’ resurrection speaks to the authenticity of the resurrection accounts to stand on their own—that Matthew, Luke and John all uniformly follow this lowly, physical, hidden glory of the risen Christ. He was raised, he was glorified but it was a not-quite-completely-glorified body that the early Christians would have expected.

### **The hiddenness of God seen in women who discovered the tomb**

One of the more striking points the field of Christian apologetics has made to authenticate the resurrection accounts is pointing to the embarrassment that it was not Jesus’ disciples, but the women who discovered the empty tomb. If the Christian communities were inventing stories of an empty tomb years after Jesus’ death, they would not have chosen women, simply because women were not acceptable witnesses. This point is one of the few mainstream apologetic reasons for the resurrection that supports also our apologetic for the resurrection texts.

In fact, we cannot emphasize this point enough. Jewish rabbinic texts and Josephus make the point well enough for us: Josephus describes the rules that “supposedly left by Moses for admissible testimony: ‘Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex.’”<sup>88</sup> Other rabbinical texts corroborate this view: “Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to a woman!” and also “Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a woman.”<sup>89</sup> Such attitudes make it difficult to imagine that if the early church was crafting a narrative to justify their theological beliefs in the resurrection, women would have been the last witnesses they selected. Perhaps one indication of this is that Paul left women out of his list of resurrection witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 to potentially avoid the scorn the Jews and Greeks would give to the original story. The redaction critics are very quick to point out that Paul did not list the women, suggesting Mark intentionally chose the women to discover the tomb. It however is problematic to their case, not constructive.<sup>90</sup> Why would the evangelists later add the women into the story, unless it was true?

If anything, the case for showing the authenticity of the Gospel accounts is only made stronger by the fact that all four Gospels make the women’s experiences the central part of the story. That they did not try to sweep this embarrassing fact under the carpet shows us they were carefully reporting exactly what happened. The sad reality is that none of the disciples ventured to the tomb at all until Mary Magdalene brought the urgent report to Peter and John who raced to the tomb with her. Furthermore, we might ask if male witnesses are so valuable why didn’t any of the Gospel writers take the time to record the details of Jesus’ appearance to Peter? In addition to Paul, Luke’s account mentions this appearance when the Emmaus disciples returned to share the news of their own experience: “There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen *and has appeared to Simon.*”<sup>91</sup> If there is any bias against the women’s testimony, we see, perhaps, a hint here in Luke 24:33,34. This group of disciples did not bother to mention Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene or the other women, but that they seem rather convinced by the testimony of Peter.

All too often we find in Scripture that God in his grace chooses the meek and lowly to shame the wise, learned and powerful. We find God hiding himself in the words of a prophet who is too young (Jeremiah), too inept with words

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<sup>87</sup> Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, pg. 115.

<sup>88</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, quoting Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* IV.8.15 § 219, pg. 367.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, quoting *Sotah* 19a and *Berachos* 60b respectively, pg. 367.

<sup>90</sup> One redaction critic who attempts to resolve this is Peter Carnley. He argues Mark was forced to use the women as witnesses because the disciples were not available; they were in Galilee. *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, pg. 59-60. Carnley’s suggestion that the evangelists used women because the disciples had fled to Galilee and were preparing to meet the Lord there is not convincing and shows his grasping for straws. Another idea put forward by Bart Ehrman suggests that Mark used women (thus the other Gospels had to follow suit) because his Gospel had a theme of revealing Christ to the marginalized not the established Jews. Women fit this mold, so he used them. This argument again seems contrived. The Roman guards who happened to be present would have served as male alternatives to the women. We also can note Jesus appeared to his believers and disciples in the resurrection; the women do not fit the description of marginalized converts at this point in the story. See “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Bart Ehrman vs. William Lane Craig,” See clip at 57:02.

<sup>91</sup> Luke 24:33b,34 emphasis mine.



(Moses), or from too lowly a background to be God's mouthpiece (Amos). We find Jesus praising foreigners and women and rebuking his disciples for their lack of faith. We find surprise that God should call the enemy of his church to be its greatest missionary. We should not be surprised that God would first reveal the grand truth of the resurrection to the women, especially Mary Magdalene. It speaks to the hiddenness of God as he hides behind witnesses the world would not accept, and through texts that modern critics find too unbelievable to consider at face value. N.T. Wright sums up the challenge historical criticism cannot answer, with a fine thought to conclude our thoughts on these points: "If you were a follower of a dead Jesus, in the middle of the first century, wanting to explain why you still thought he was important, and why some of your number had (inexplicably) begun to say that he had been raised from the dead, you would not have told the stories like this. You would have done a better job."<sup>92</sup>

## **B. The individual resurrection accounts stand alone**

Christian commentators on the resurrection frequently insist upon the need for the Gospel accounts to stand on their own merit. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each described the events of Easter to their own purposes without feeling the need to offer every detail.<sup>93</sup> Pressing them for details they may have chosen not to give, for whatever reason, is unfair to remembering their original purposes. Perhaps allowing the accounts to stand alone for a moment will give us a final apologetic reason to trust the history of the event, in spite of the inconsistencies and tensions between their details. We do not have time to explore all the unique aspects to each Gospel account; hopefully, a sampling of their individual purposes shows the integrity to stand alone.

### **Matthew – the earthquake and cover-up**

Matthew wrote to the Jews. Paul tells us "Jews demand miraculous signs." It seems that the Pharisees and elders regularly demanded those of Jesus. Perhaps this explains why Matthew felt compelled to mention several other phenomena that took place at the crucifixion and resurrection: the earthquake on Good Friday, the curtain being torn in two, the tombs opening and the dead rising and visiting in the city. The events of Easter are somewhat parallel: the earthquake happens as the angel comes down, Christ is raised and the tomb is empty, he appears to the women and then the disciples. It seems Matthew is taking care, to be meticulous in details that corroborate the divine miracle of the resurrection. Perhaps in addition to a motivation to offer miraculous signs for the Jews, Matthew's former job as a tax collector might have given him a penchant for being meticulous to details.

One criticism of Matthew is that he created these phenomena to make Jesus' resurrection fit in with some of the Old Testament resurrection texts: Daniel 12:2-3; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Isaiah 26:19. Such critiques of Matthew envision that he added the detail about the dead rising on Good Friday a la the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 and Isaiah 26:19.<sup>94</sup> As Jewish an account as his is, we can see why this charge seems attractive to redaction critics. Our answer is to ask why Matthew does not connect the dots more fully for us as he does so often pointing out, "Then what was spoken by the prophet was fulfilled..."

Another Jewish element to Matthew's content is his report of the cover up by the Sanhedrin. Matthew may have had access as a former agent of the Roman governor to get a full explanation why Pilate would accept the report that the

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<sup>92</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 680.

<sup>93</sup> John Wenham's comment to this point is most apt, "It needs to be remembered that we are dealing with two descriptions of an event [speaking to the issue of one or two angels, Matthew vs. Luke], and not with two witnesses replying to cross-examination. If witnesses who had been in the tomb at the time, had been asked independently, 'Precisely how many men did you see?' and had given different answers, that would have shown one or other [sic] to be unreliable. But these witnesses are not answering the question 'How many?', they are giving (as all descriptions must be) incomplete descriptions of a complex event." *Easter Enigma*, pg. 87.

<sup>94</sup> Isaiah 26:19: "But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead."

soldiers had fallen asleep at their post while the disciples made off with the body. He reports it faithfully for us. The modern resurrection myth has to explain this apologetic addition to Matthew's gospel by suggesting to us that Matthew not only made up the stories of Jesus' resurrection, but went so dutifully far as to also craft a fiction about the Jewish stories debunking his original story, plus a fictional explanation of the true events to cover them up. N.T. Wright's praise for such historical creativity is worth noting: "If any historian finds this sequence more probable than the one which Matthew offers, I can only admire their ability to believe such remarkable things."<sup>95</sup>

### Mark – the “incomplete” story

Mark's account is frequently used by historical-biblical critics to show the earliest Christian ideas of Jesus rising from the dead knew nothing of resurrection appearances or an empty tomb.<sup>96</sup> It is easy to understand why Mark receives these attacks when we listen to how his Gospel ends without the controversial ending in 16:9-20: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." (ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ) While we do not have time to consider the question of Mark's ending, it is worth pointing out the challenge with ending his Gospel with a participle. It also does not seem to fit for the Gospel to end with the women being afraid to tell anyone. Inevitably they did, or the news of the resurrection would have gone nowhere—there would be no Christian church. Perhaps the real ending to Mark's Gospel was lost by accident or intentionally removed by some enemy of the church. The early Christians realized this at some point and added not one, but at least two alternative endings.

What we can see in verses 1-8 are an apologetic for the risen Lord, even without mention of any appearances: 1) in the empty tomb, 2) in Mark's mention that the women "said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Redaction critics are quick to point out that this is evidence of Christian fabrication. The women did not tell anyone, because they did not know Jesus to be bodily raised to life on earth. The resurrection appearances were a later invention—or else Mark would have included some appearance stories and reported the women telling the tale of the empty tomb. However, we can easily see Mark why would include such a detail to show why the women did not run through the city immediately and stir up a public frenzy over the empty tomb. Surely such a public frenzy would have followed if the body of Jesus had been publicly reported missing just days after such a public execution over the Passover feast. Instead we safely assume they walked hurriedly through the city without stopping to talk to passersby about this incredible news so that they could tell the other disciples and believers quietly what had happened.

Mark's Gospel has been building to the climax of the resurrection. His succinct Gospel has shown Jesus' power throughout, but it also emphasizes the secret Messiahship of Jesus to his disciples.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps by the Spirit's inspiration this secret nature of Jesus' role as our Messiah continues in the resurrection by leaving us with women who were commanded not to speak about the resurrection, thus ending at 16:8. More likely the Holy Spirit saw fit to give us the ending of Mark that we do possess. Even if the ending we have is not attested to in the "earliest manuscripts"<sup>98</sup> (notably Sinaiticus or Vaticanus), Mark's account still demonstrates how God hides himself in the texts. The message is still there speaking the good news of the resurrection and ascension in the weakness of paper, ink and words.

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<sup>95</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 639.

<sup>96</sup> See Bultmann's comment to this point, "The story of the empty tomb is completely secondary...the point of the story is that the empty tomb proves the Resurrection...the story is an apologetic legend. Paul knows nothing about the empty tomb, which does not imply that the story was not yet in existence, but most probably that it was a subordinate theme with no significance to the official Kerygma." quoted by Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 625.

<sup>97</sup> See the request to keep quiet about miracles 1:34,44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36,37; 8:26,30; 9:9.

<sup>98</sup> Note the comment in NIV 84 and NIV 11: "The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20."

## Luke and Acts – narratives to make a point

Edersheim points out that Luke's resurrection account in chapter 24 can be read in such a way that we interpret all the events of Luke 24 to have happened in one day, including the ascension.<sup>99</sup> Yet, we see in Acts 1:3 that Luke explained all these events and post-resurrection appearances took place over a period of forty days. Clearly, Luke does not mean to contradict himself. He was simply not concerned about spelling out the details of his chronology for us. Nor are we to necessarily assume that Jesus' command to "stay in the city" in Luke 24:48 meant the disciples should also not go and meet him in Galilee where the angels had instructed them to go. Redaction critics love to point out this inconsistency between Matthew's command to meet Jesus in Galilee and Luke's command to stay in the city, suggesting the Luke rewrote the resurrection stories to accommodate his ascension story in Jerusalem.

It seems that Luke combined various elements of his resurrection account to tie off the details at the end of his Gospel. John Wenham calls this literary condensing "telescoping" and offers a more challenging example for harmonizing the Gospels in 24:9-11:<sup>100</sup>

<sup>9</sup> When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. <sup>10</sup> It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

This particular detail is difficult to harmonize with the other accounts for Luke seems to combine the reporting of the empty tomb with all the women. We can recognize that this is a case of condensing the account when we remember Mary Magdalene left the other women to run back and tell Peter and John and subsequently viewed the tomb and saw the angels alone. Like the other evangelists Luke lists Mary out of importance, but it does not necessarily mean all the women reported their findings at one time. If anything Luke shows us again that he is summarizing the event, not offering a chronological, eye-witnessed testimony of every detail.

One surprising feature of allowing Luke's account to stand on its own is the way in which Luke ascribes Jesus to be king Messiah. N.T. Wright suggests Luke intentionally ties events in the life of Jesus to the ruling kings and authorities. For example, Luke's mentions Herod in chapter 1, Caesar Augustus in chapter 2, the Roman authorities in 13:1-3. It is not simply a matter of setting the historical setting, but part of Jesus' coming to this earth to establish his heavenly kingdom. Jesus' kingdom does not come with careful observation (referenced in 17:20,21), is finally established at the ascension in Acts 1, and the ascension mentioned in 24:51. N.T. Wright points out that:

"the custom was well established of the emperors being declared to be divine after their death, with the evidence produced consisting of one or two witnesses who had glimpsed the soul of the dead emperor ascending towards the heavens. ...The Christian ascension stories would have been heard, in the second half of the first century, as counter-imperial. Jesus was lord, and Caesar was not."<sup>101</sup>

The hiddenness of Christ's kingdom coming out in the hidden way he ascends after the resurrection only adds to our apologetic for understanding the hiddenness of God in the resurrection. It would be difficult for such ideas to be expounded if we harmonized the texts, separating Luke's attempt to connect the resurrection to the ascension.

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<sup>99</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah: New Updated Edition (abridged)*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000. pg. 901.

<sup>100</sup> Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, pg. 89.

<sup>101</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 656.

## John – written that we may believe

More than the synoptic Gospels John's Gospel demonstrates how each account stands independent to serve the purposes he had for writing. John starts in chapter 1 with the discourse on the incarnate Word in whom is life. He ends with the conclusion that believing in the risen Son of God we find life in his name. He writes his own experience and testimony into the narrative with comments about what he saw and believed, even what he and the other disciples did not understand. Even though this Gospel was written last, what we see is a first-hand, eye-witness account that remembers specific details, such as where the burial cloths lay folded in the tomb. We notice details like this and comments like 20:9, "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead." These are the kinds of fiction cannot convincingly produce. They are the kind of details myths ignore in favor of dramatic language and imagery. His personal discovery of the resurrection and Jesus' appearances certainly were dramatic memorable moments for John, but he did not dramatize what he wrote. He presented it to show us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and to convince us that what he said is true.

Perhaps John humanizes the resurrection accounts more than the other Gospels, but it adds to the credibility of his eye-witness account. God reveals himself through the veil of John's words, his experience and memories that we too might believe Jesus is the Christ and find life in his name. When by his grace, God works faith in people's hearts through these Words, the Gospel has worked, even if these words have not been perfectly harmonized with the other accounts. If anything, it again shows us the value in allowing the Gospels to stand individually.

## C. Conclusion

The hiddenness of God shows us in the resurrection accounts how God intentionally gives us texts that are surprisingly simple, under-stated, and weak. They could have said more. They could have connected the dots for us how Jesus' resurrection means we have eternal hope. They could have pointed to the prophecies of Psalm 16, Job 19:25 or Isaiah 53:10-12 being fulfilled. They could have described the moment of Jesus' resurrection. They do not.

God revealing himself in meekness and lowliness is not unique—it is a central theme in Scripture. It is, however, surprising to find such meekness in the resurrection of Jesus. The hiddenness and meekness of the theology of the cross is a powerful sign of the authenticity and reliability of the Gospels. Even if we leave the resurrection accounts in tension and do not resolve the inconsistencies to our satisfaction, we leave reassured with the confidence of Paul, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!"<sup>102</sup>

Evangelicals try to use apologetics to accomplish what only the Gospel can do—to give certainty in the resurrection and confidence of the hope we have in Christ. In contrast, our Lutheran apologetic appeals to the hiddenness of God and allows us to have it both ways, in a sense. We point to the empty tomb and remain astounded at not only the facts of the story, but also at the way God chose to reveal these facts in the text. We can let the texts stand alone with full confidence God has given us a reliable, inerrant account of what happened on Easter Sunday. Do we know every detail we would like? Of course not. We know enough to boldly confess as Thomas did, "My Lord and my God!"

Yet we also can use our reason through harmonizing the details to the best of our ability using the historical research, and apologetic tools at our disposal to investigate the Gospel accounts. There is value in harmonizing the resurrection accounts. It is a worthwhile endeavor, worth our time and effort. However, we can also have a proper perspective on what these apologetic answers are able to say and *not* to say. We can use reason in its proper role, as a servant to the Gospel, not the lord over the Gospel. We can use reason to serve the Gospel as Siegbert Becker suggests, "It is therefore not Christianity that needs to be made reasonable. It is reason that needs to be made Christian."<sup>103</sup> He is risen!

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<sup>102</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20a

<sup>103</sup> Siegbert, Becker, "Luther's Apologetics." *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, 1958. <[www.wlssays.net/node/127](http://www.wlssays.net/node/127)> (accessed 24 April 2014).

## Appendix – Harmonized Commentary

In researching this essay it became quickly apparent that any decent harmony of the resurrection accounts I found on the internet appealed directly to John Wenham's *Easter Enigma*, first published in 1984. Some of these internet harmonies gave credit to him, but nearly all of them copied his timelines and suggestions, even his maps. While some of his suggestions are more wild conjecture than I am comfortable with, it is difficult to produce an alternative that is any better. Since the book is relatively obscure, I am offering a synopsis of his harmonized commentary below. My comments will summarize Wenham's points, and offer my own opinions. Please consult his book to get a fuller picture. I have used Wenham's maps and numbered timeline verbatim<sup>1</sup>, while adding my own comments and pertinent quotations in the footnotes.

### Character Identification

- **Mary Magdalene** – Wenham's most controversial suggestion is that Mary Magdalene should be identified with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. He spends an entire chapter on this single identification, though he claims it is not essential to this harmony.<sup>2</sup> Mary performed two anointings on Jesus. In John 11:2 John records, "This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair," before we hear the story of Mary's anointing in chapter 12. Wenham contends this could be a double reference back to Luke's account in 7:38 since John was attempting to supplement the synoptic gospels. The second anointing may have been an completion of the first, after Mary became emotional over Jesus for receiving forgiveness. He suggests Mary had been a prostitute in Magdala, a town in Galilee known for immorality, and that John 11:5, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus," deliberately does not name Mary because prior to her conversion she was away from home, living in sin. These other points are in favour of such an identification:
  - Magdala provides a suitable location for Luke's sinner in chapter 7 due to its immorality and proximity to Roman officers.
  - Luke's introduction of Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2 makes sense if she is the woman who anointed Jesus with her tears in Luke 7:44-50.
  - Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany never appear together, though both are close to Jesus and exhibit similar personality, portraying a consistent character when they are dovetailed together.
  - In answer to the objection, why doesn't Luke identify the two Mary's together? He notes that Luke is delicate in not calling Mary Magdalene a "prostitute" or naming the sinful woman in chapter 7, though most identify her as Mary Magdalene. Additionally, if he is correct Mary Magdalene is only called Mary while at home (Luke 10 and John 11) while elsewhere distinguished by the moniker Mary Magdalene to keep her distinct from all the other Mary's.
  - Perhaps most compelling—given the proximity of Jerusalem and Bethany we find it odd that Mary is not involved in any of the passion or resurrection accounts after the emotional raising of Lazarus and her devotion to Jesus.
- **Clopas/ Cleopas/Alphaeus** – The other identification Wenham makes is that these three men are the same person. This identification seems more plausible. We can identify Alphaeus is the father of James the younger (the less).<sup>3</sup> "The other Mary" is his wife since she is identified as James's mother.<sup>4</sup> We can say with certainty that his name is also Clopas (perhaps because Alphaeus name is transliterated from Aramaic into Greek). Cleopas would thus be a variant spelling of Clopas. Wenham identifies Clopas also as the brother of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. It gives Cleopas a reason to be among the inner circle of the believers on Easter.
- **Joanna** – Wenham builds a case that Luke must have used Joanna as a source (similar to Mary at Jesus' birth) for his resurrection perspective. Luke 8:1-4 describes how Mary Magdalene, she and Susanna had followed Jesus and his disciples and financed them out of their own expense. Joanna was married to Cuza, Herod's household manager. This puts her into contact with the upper echelons of society and explains her means to support Jesus. Luke lists her second after Mary Magdalene, perhaps indicating a position of honour she held. Wenham suggests that the other women would likely have followed her lead due to this position.

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<sup>1</sup> Maps and numbered timelines are verbatim. However, I took liberty to change some headings for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> See pg. 32.

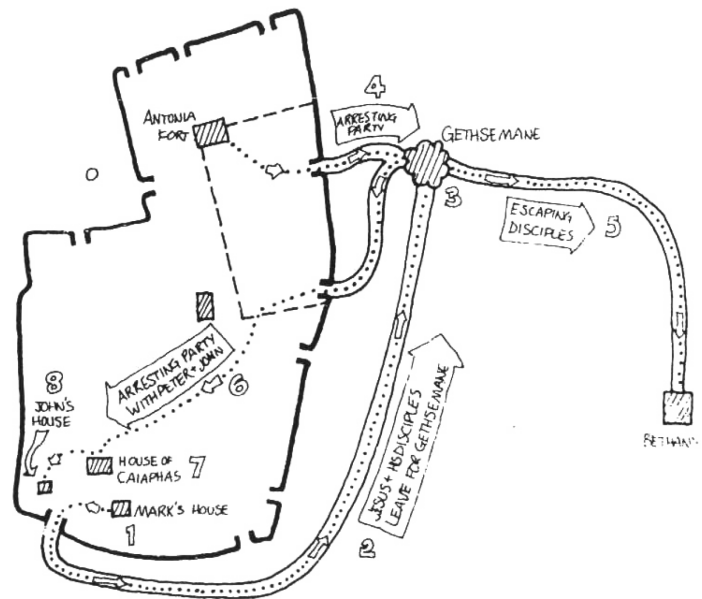
<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:13, Mark 3:18

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:56

## MAUNDY THURSDAY NIGHT

### Maundy Thursday

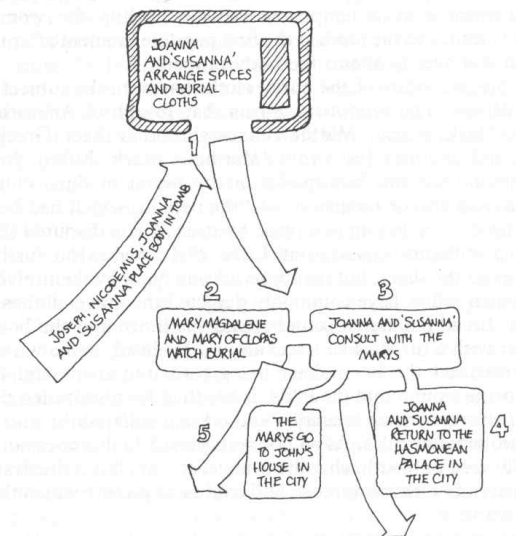
1. Jesus eats the Passover with the twelve in Mark's house. Judas leaves to arrange the arrest.
2. Jesus, the Eleven and Mark leave the house and cross the Kidron Valley. Jesus warns that the Shepherd will be struck down and the sheep scattered.
3. They enter Gethsemane, where Jesus prays.
4. Judas arrives with the arresting party, consisting of members of the Temple guard and soldiers from the Roman garrison, stationed at the Antonia Fort to the north of the Temple.
5. The Eleven escape up the Mount of Olives in the direction of Bethany; Mark is nearly caught.<sup>5</sup>
6. Jesus is taken back to the city; Peter and John think better of their cowardice and join the returning company, which goes to the high priest's residence. At the house of Caiaphas, Peter denies Jesus.
7. John takes Peter to his home,<sup>6</sup> where Zebedee and Salome, Clopas and Mary, and Jesus' Mother await them.



### GOOD FRIDAY LATE AFTERNOON - THE BURIAL

### Good Friday Afternoon (the Burial)

1. Joanna and 'Susanna' (place name for the "other woman" of Luke's women mentioned in 24:10)<sup>7</sup> follow Joseph and his servants and Nicodemus into the tomb to help lay out the body.
2. Meanwhile, the two Marys watch from a distance.<sup>8</sup>
3. The four women confer and agree to return at first light on Sunday to anoint the body.<sup>9</sup>
4. Joanna and 'Susanna' return to the Hasmonean Palace and prepare ointments.<sup>10</sup>
5. Mary of Clopas takes Mary Magdalene to John's house.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>5</sup> I have included this page to establish that nine of the disciples fled to Bethany. Based on Wenham's hypothesis that Mary Magdalene is Mary of Bethany, that would indicate how she found out about Jesus' arrest and would have journeyed to the crucifixion site to watch (in part on behalf of the nine).

<sup>6</sup> John's house, see pg. 41,42. See footnote 22 on pg. 7 for more information on the basis for John's family having a house in Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:55 "The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee..." though Luke does not name them, the list is specific due to his previous list in Luke 8:1-4. It is on this basis that, I believe Wenham speculates the other woman is 'Susanna'.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 15:47, Matthew 27:61

<sup>9</sup> This is speculation, but given that these women did not necessarily stay together over the Passover makes logical sense.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:56 "Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment." Wenham infers that this verse is speaking primarily of Joanna and 'Susanna' because they happen to have spices on hand that could be prepared quickly before the Sabbath began. They would have been somewhat wealthy (as Luke 8:1-3 already suggests) because Joanna was the wife of Cuza, Herod's manager and would perhaps have stayed at the palace. Susanna is mentioned in Luke 8:3, perhaps because she was prominent as well, though the text mentions, "many others" followed Jesus. Wenham suggest that Luke follows Joanna's point of view throughout the resurrection accounts rather than Mary Magdalene. (pg. 68).

<sup>11</sup> This last point is inferred on the basis of Mark 16:1 which actually takes place on Holy Saturday evening after the Sabbath is finished. Wenham's timeline infers that Mary Magdalene would not have had time to return to Bethany after the burial before the Sabbath began, and the next action we hear of her is purchasing spices to anoint Jesus after the Sabbath. He assumes she would have been invited to John's house with the rest of the believers in Jerusalem.

## Holy Saturday

### Matthew 27:62-66

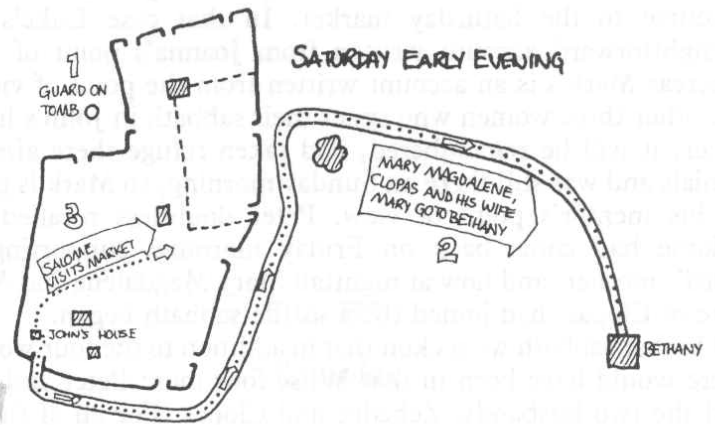
<sup>62</sup> The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. <sup>63</sup> "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' <sup>64</sup> So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

<sup>65</sup> "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." <sup>66</sup> So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

### Mark 16:1

<sup>1</sup> When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

1. The grave is sealed and the temple guard, backed by a contingent of Roman soldiers, sets up a watch.
2. As the Sabbath draws towards its end, Clopas and his wife leave John's house and go with Mary Magdalene to regain contact with the nine disciples in Bethany. <sup>12</sup>
3. When the Sabbath is over, Salome buys spices for the anointing in the Jerusalem market. <sup>13</sup>



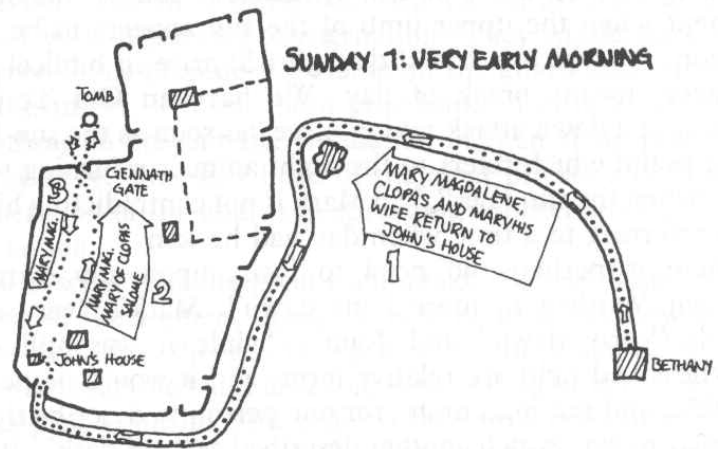
<sup>12</sup> This point should really be ordered #3 on the list. Wenham believes Mary Magdalene, Clopas and his wife Mary would want to return to Bethany to inform the other nine disciples. Clopas and Mary were parents to James the younger, giving them motivation to go. This also separates them from Salome, giving Matthew the reason to list just the two women, while Mark adds Salome who would have stayed in Jerusalem. For Mark to list only those three makes sense, if he happened to be at Peter and John's house, (or writing from Peter's perspective) when the women set off for the tomb.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 16:1 "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body." Mark implies all three went to buy the spices. I do not see any reason why the two Marys could not have accompanied her to make this purchase. Wenham suggests they would have given Salome money to make one large collective purchase on their behalf of spices at the Jerusalem markets before dark. Either way, the window of opportunity to make this purchase would have been short.

## Very Early on Easter Sunday Morning

Matthew 28:1-4	Mark 16:1-4	Luke 24:1-2	John 20:1-2
<p><sup>1</sup> After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb <sup>3</sup> and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"</p>

1. While it is still dark, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (accompanied by her husband Clopas) set off from Bethany to return to John's house.<sup>14</sup> (There is an earthquake, the angel removes the grave-stone and the guard flees.)
2. Clopas stays at John's house, while Salome joins the two Marys and the three proceed to the garden via the Gennath Gate.
3. They see the grave open. Mary Magdalene runs back to tell John and Peter.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>14</sup> John 20:1, Matthew 28:1 – Though the texts do not mention Clopas, culture would prohibit women from traveling at dark without a male companion. However Wenham believes Clopas would not have accompanied the women to the tomb because anointing was “women’s work” (pg. 82). Matthew 28:1 only includes Mary Magdalene & Mary, wife of Clopas, “the other Mary” as those who set out for the tomb. His list of women makes sense if he is recording who left from Bethany to do this work.

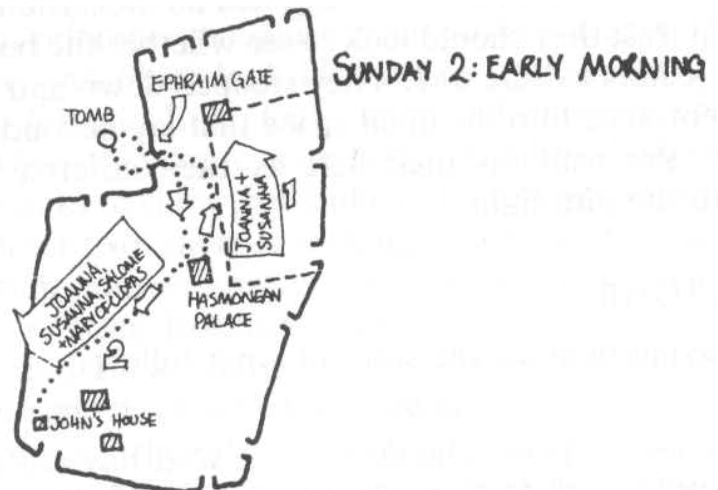
<sup>15</sup> John 20:2 –Notice Mary’s words to Peter & John “We do not know where they have put him”—she is indicating she left the other women to share this news. Of all the points in Wenham, his treatment for the timelines on Mary Magdalene is what makes his work most convincing. “Mary Magdalene at once jumped to the conclusion that the body had been taken. She dashed off to tell Peter and John leaving the [other] women standing there lost for words” (pg. 83). The assumption is that these women carried on without Mary Magdalene and their experiences with the angels follow, while she is gone. This removes Mary Magdalene from the Synoptic encounters with the angels. It does not contradict the Synoptic texts because all three Gospels put her with the women on the way to the tomb. They simply do not disclose she left. How do we resolve the “reporting” part to the disciples? The easiest solution is that Mary reported *and* the other women reported, but not necessarily at the same time. But since their reports are the same: “He was not there! The angel said he is risen!” makes it possible to group them together in reporting as Luke does in 24:9,10.



## Early on Easter Sunday Morning – Joanna, Salome, the “other” Mary, ‘Susanna’

Matthew 28:5-8	Mark 16:5-8	Luke 24:3-8
<p><sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."</p>	<p><sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.   <sup>6</sup> "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' "</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.   <sup>4</sup> While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup> "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words.</p>
<p><sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.</p>	<p><sup>8</sup> Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.</p>	

1. Joanna and ‘Susanna’ set out from the Hasmonean palace and reach the garden via the Ephraim gate. They lead Salome and the other Mary into the tomb, where the angels make themselves visible<sup>16</sup> and deliver their message.<sup>17</sup>
2. Led by Joanna they all rush back into the city and eventually find their way to John’s house.<sup>18</sup>



<sup>16</sup> Position of the angels? “The translation ‘stood by’, which would bring Luke into contradiction with Mark’s ‘sitting’, cannot be insisted on. The word is frequently used meaning ‘to appear to’, often implying suddenness. When the angels appeared in the little cave room, they may well have appeared in a sitting position, very much as Mary Magdalene saw them on her later visit—a position calculated to minimize the alarm that their sudden presence was bound to cause... Only Luke says explicitly that the women had gone into the tomb before the appearance of the angels... [With regard to Matthew’s angel] we have argued that he had withdrawn into the cave before the women arrived, so that his, ‘Come, see the place where he lay’ is not an invitation to enter the tomb, but to put away their fears and take a close look at the grave space (now empty save for burial linen)” (pg. 85-86).

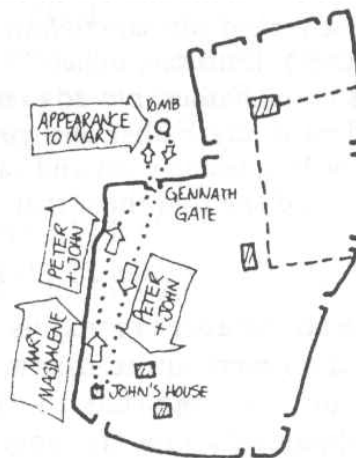
<sup>17</sup> Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:3-8 – It is not too difficult to harmonize the angel’s message. It is fairly easy to make a “textual harmony” of the message that includes all the words and does not sound artificial. Mark adds a detail the others leave out, “Go tell his disciples and Peter.” Perhaps that is to account for Peter’s denial and status before Jesus restores him in John 21. That Mark should record it adds credence to the idea that Peter was a source for his information. All that happened in the tomb could have taken less than 10 minutes. It helps us see how condensed these timelines are, and how much the getting around and through the city could have affected the story.

<sup>18</sup> “Luke’s account evidently telescopes the coming of Mary Magdalene to Peter and John (giving her pride of place in the list of women) and the coming of Joanna and the other women to the eleven *and to the rest*. (He shows himself conscious that others besides the eleven were informed.) He also strikes the unbelief motif which the next eight verses of Mark is [sic] going to emphasise. So we may picture Joanna leading ‘Susanna’, Salome and the other Mary back into the city by the way she had come, through the Ephraim gate. At first utterly speechless, scarcely knowing where they were going, their fear and bewilderment mingled with great joy, they soon found themselves at John’s house bursting to tell the astonishing news” (pg. 89).

## Early on Easter Sunday Morning – Mary Magdalene, Peter & John

Mark 16:9-11	Luke 24:12	John 20:3-18
<p><sup>9</sup> When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. <sup>10</sup> She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. <sup>11</sup> When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.</p>	<p><sup>12</sup> Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes,</p>
<p><sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.</p>		

1. Meanwhile John and Peter<sup>19</sup> (followed shortly by Mary Magdalene) have set off for the tomb by the Gennath Gate, and they see the empty tomb.
2. As they return home, Mary Magdalene lingers behind. She sees the angels in the tomb and then Jesus appears to her.<sup>20</sup>
3. She returns to John's house.



SUNDAY 3: EARLY MORNING

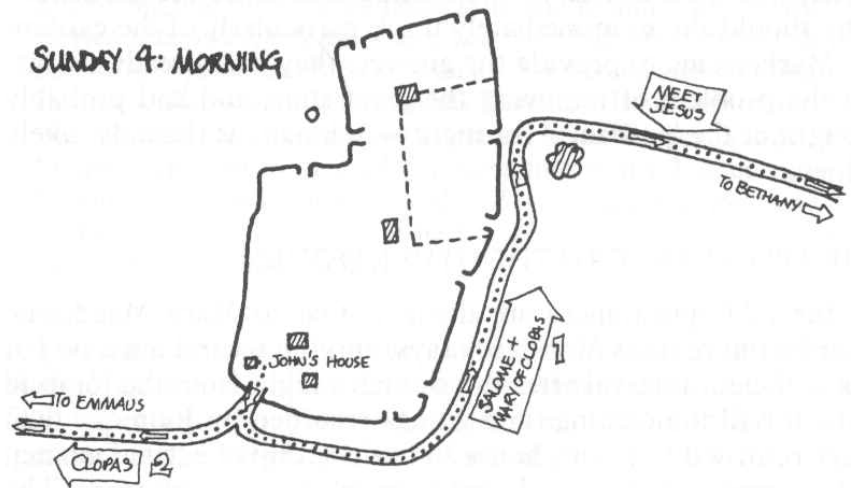
<sup>19</sup> If John had a house in Jerusalem he likely knew the streets the best, and would have known the quickest way to the tomb. Even though Luke only mentions Peter in 24:12 – he seems to indicate John went too. Note the words of the Emmaus disciples corroborate John's account in Luke, "Then some of our companions went to the tomb..." (Lk 24:24).

<sup>20</sup> Mary's visit with the angels is distinct. It happens after she reported the empty tomb (the others see the angels before); she was alone "I do not know where they have laid him" (20:13) vs "We do not know" (20:2); she is weeping. Additionally her appearance with Jesus is different. Wenham stresses that Jesus' command not to touch (Μή μου ἅπτου) should be translated, "do not cling to me". The NIV is unusual in that it *does not* translate (Μή μου ἅπτου) this way. If anything this only adds to our point about the resurrected nature of Jesus (not as some have suggested, a contradiction with Mt 28:9,10 because there he allows touching). Jesus isn't forbidding touching, but giving her reassurance that she does not need to fear leaving him to report the good news.

## Sunday Morning to Midday

<p><b>Matthew 28:9-10</b></p> <p><sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."</p>	<p><b>Mark 16:12</b></p> <p><sup>12</sup> Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country.</p>	<p><b>Luke 24:9-11</b></p> <p><sup>9</sup> When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. <sup>10</sup> It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.</p> <p><i>Please read Luke 24:13-31 in your Bible.</i></p>
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1. Mary wife of Clopas (the other Mary) and Salome set off for Bethany to tell the good news to the nine disciples there. On the way they too are met by Jesus.<sup>21</sup>
2. Clopas and his companion set out for Emmaus. Jesus makes himself known at the midday meal.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>21</sup> Luke 24:9-12 & Mark 16:7, Matthew 28:7 – Matthew & Mark’s angels commission the women to tell the disciples (and by this term it seems broadly to refer to believers, not just the Eleven). Wenham envisions that the women followed Joanna back into the city; he suggests they followed her out of respect to her high position in society, not because she knew where to go. (Such a suggestion is entirely plausible; deference to those in higher positions is part of Eastern cultures.)

Wenham suggests that once the women found their way to Peter and John’s house. Peter and John arrive back slightly before or just after so that they heard an initial report. Mary Magdalene soon follows them. He then suggests Mary, wife of Clopas (the “other Mary”) and Salome volunteered to finish the angel’s commission and go tell the other nine disciples in Bethany. Wenham does not say why. I speculate that Wenham excludes the others because he envisions Joanna and ‘Susanna’ returning to the palace. However, there is no reason why Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and ‘Susanna’ should not have gone on to Bethany to deliver the report. Wenham’s suggestion does have two good reasons: 1) Both Mary of Clopas and Salome had sons in Bethany among the nine disciples; 2) Matthew had reported only Mary Magdalene & “the other Mary” going to the tomb; if “the other Mary” came back with Salome instead of Mary Magdalene, it does not affect Matthew’s description. Mary Magdalene would get a chance to report to the nine in the afternoon when then went to Jerusalem.

The women meet Jesus somewhere between Jerusalem and Bethany, perhaps on the Mount of Olives. This seems to be an important and necessary change from our traditional chronology. Wenham does this to account for the time necessary for Jesus’ appearance with Mary Magdalene to take place and for all the comings and goings.

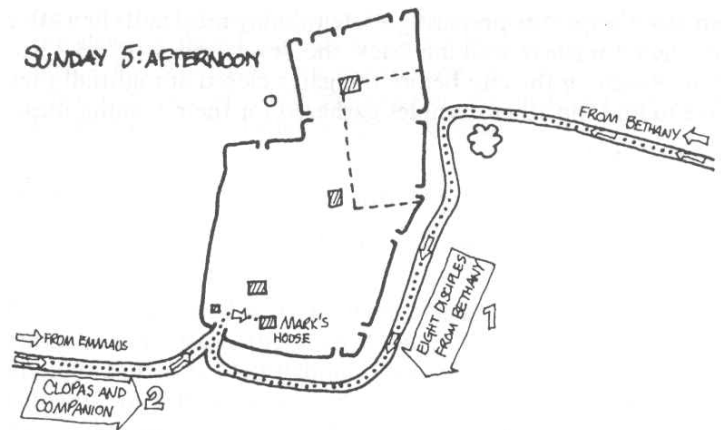
<sup>22</sup> Luke 24:13-33; Mark 16:12,13: Wenham suggests the road to Emmaus disciples (Cleopas and another companion) had left from John’s house in the morning after the women left for Bethany, but before the disciples returned. If Cleopas is the same as Clopas it easily explains how he was already at John’s house, with others of Jesus’ relatives and heard the news. Additionally, we know Cleopas knew that Peter and John had gone to the tomb, when he mentions “some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said” (Lk 24:23). I disagree with Wenham on the timeframe. Including the Emmaus disciples in his mid-morning schematic suggesting that Jesus dined with them at the noon meal – “Stay with us for it is nearly evening” (πρὸς ἑσπέραν – literally, “towards evening”), (Lk 24:29). Wenham cites several studies indicating that in Eastern cultures hospitality customs “could ask guests to stay—‘Night is falling, you can start again tomorrow’—even if it is no later than two in the afternoon” (pg. 102).

## Sunday Afternoon & Evening

Mark 16:12-14	Luke 24: 31-36	John 20:19
<p><sup>12</sup> Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. <sup>13</sup> These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.</p> <p><sup>14</sup> Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.</p>	<p><sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" <sup>33</sup> They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.</p> <p>There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together <sup>34</sup> and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." <sup>35</sup> Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. <sup>36</sup> While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."</p>	<p><sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"</p>

(During the afternoon Jesus appears to Peter.)

1. The nine apostles (less Thomas)<sup>23</sup> come in from Bethany and gather with others in the upper room.<sup>24</sup>
2. Clopas and his companion return from Emmaus and join them.<sup>25</sup> Jesus appears.<sup>26</sup>



<sup>23</sup> Wenham suggests after the women reported the news to them (Luke 24:9-11) they returned to Jerusalem to confirm what had been said.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Luke 24:33 - "There they found the Eleven" to John 20:24 - "Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came." How to resolve this inconsistency? The apostles are given a variety of grouping names including "the Twelve" and after Judas died, "the Eleven". Even if Thomas was not present, Luke does not call them, "the Ten" but still uses the numerical title to specify who it was.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Luke 24:33-35, which indicates the disciples' joy and belief at the news from the Emmaus disciples, vs. Mark 16:13, which points out their disbelief. Two points to resolve: 1) Note in Mark 16:10 Mary Magdalene had reported the appearance Jesus made to her to "those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping" (τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ γενόμενοις πενθοῦσι καὶ κλαίουσιν). Now Mark tells us the Emmaus disciples reported the news to "the rest" (τοῖς λοιποῖς) or the "remaining"—I find this second grouping supportive of Wenham's theory that the remaining disciples had returned from Bethany in the afternoon upon hearing the report from Mary of Clopas and Salome (and any others who came). 2) There seems to be a contradiction between Mark & Luke about whether the disciples believed or doubted. "The truth must surely be that the ten apostles present were in various states of part-belief and part-unbelief" (pg. 104).

<sup>26</sup> **A note about Later appearances in Galilee:** I am intentionally stopping here, but will briefly point out that Wenham suggests Matthew 28:16-20, John 21 and 1 Corinthians 15:6, "he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers" are all part of the Galilean appearances where the angels had instructed the believers to meet Jesus. "There is no point in the forty days where a *chance* gathering of 500 brethren can be plausibly imagined... So the meeting with 500 brethren must have been a *convened* meeting [in Galilee]" (pg. 113). He believes the Mt 28:16-20 Great Commission fits because Matthew remarks, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where *Jesus had told them to go*" (Mt 16:16)—implying Jesus had directed them to a pre-arranged mountain and time. Perhaps these instructions came as part of the John 21 meeting with the disciples by the shore of Galilee. It seems like an outdoor location, such as a mountain served as a good opportunity for a large crowd. If that is the case, we now also understand why "some doubted" (Mt 28:17)—not implying the Eleven necessarily.

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*An electronic version of this essay, along with a six-lesson, companion Bible Class called, "Unraveling Easter" is available for download at <<https://db.tt/mzdFBmB0>>.*