

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 28:1 - 28:10



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg examines the events described in Matthew 28:1-10, which describe the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb by several women. Gregg notes that while the exact order of events cannot be proven, it is clear that the stone covering the entrance to the tomb had already been removed when the women arrived. This fact, along with other evidence such as the testimony of witnesses and the unnerving of guards, suggests that the resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb are historical facts. Gregg also points out that while Paul does not explicitly mention the appearance of Jesus to 500 brethren described in other Gospels, the resurrection appearances are nonetheless central to the story of the early Christian church.

### Transcript

Today we'll be looking at the 28th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. And this is, as most of you know, the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. And like the final chapter of most of the Gospels, we have the story of the resurrection of Christ and the story of the follow-up appearances of Christ after the resurrection.

Now, when you compare the various accounts at the ends of each of these Gospels, you'll find that the details are not the same. Now, Matthew and Mark and Luke and John all give different selection of details about the events after the resurrection of Christ. They all agree on one thing, and that is that He did rise again.

And they all agree that certain people saw Him after His resurrection. Beyond this, there are some other details that they all confirm, or that several of them confirm, but there are a number of individual details in each Gospel that are not recorded in the others. The differences are significant enough to have given some critics grounds to argue that maybe these accounts are contradictory to each other, and therefore not reliable.

But that is a much too radical a conclusion to reach based on the evidence available. It is entirely possible from the evidence available to harmonize the four accounts and to recognize that although none of them gives the whole story, all of them give legitimate and true parts of the whole story. The story is a long one, has many details, and each of

the writers gives a portion of it.

It's a little bit analogous to the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross. We have some of them found in Luke, some in John, one in Matthew, and yet no one author gives all seven of them. And because of that, we don't know exactly in what order they were uttered.

There is a reasonable reconstruction that can be made to say, well, I think they came in this order, and we could, with a degree of certainty, say that's probably right. But it doesn't matter. We don't know the exact order, and we can't prove it.

The only way we could do so is if one of the gospel writers would give us all of them in their consecutive order. Instead, we have a few here and a few there, and we have to resort to a certain amount of conjecture in reconstructing the exact chronology of the sayings of Jesus from the cross. It's not important that we know the exact chronology, but if we want to know it, we have to resort to a certain degree of conjecture.

Likewise, with the appearances of Christ after his resurrection, we have a similar state of affairs. We have each of the gospels giving some of the information, but none of them giving all the information. And in the absence of the information, we have to conjecture a little if we want to try to reconstruct a chronological sequence of the appearances of Christ after his resurrection.

Now, we do have such a sequence that can be suggested, and let me just give it to you real quickly here. This sequence is actually gathered from data from all four of the gospels. We read in Mark and Luke and Matthew that on the first day of the week, Sunday morning, there were a group of women who came to the tomb.

They were intending to anoint the body of Jesus. He had been hastily buried on Friday evening before sundown and had not really been able to be fully embalmed in the way that they wanted to, and so they were bringing spices, hoping to embalm him. But they remembered as they were coming to the tomb that the tomb had been sealed shut, and they were conjecturing among themselves as to how they might get the stone removed or who might remove it for them so that they could get to the body and anoint it with spices.

Now, as they approached the tomb, they saw that the tomb was open, and at that point, Mary Magdalene, who was one of the women, assumed that the body had been stolen, that the tomb had been tampered with, seemed apparent. None of them assumed that the body had raised from the dead. Mary, jumping to the conclusion that the body had been stolen, separated from the other women and headed back to Jerusalem to the house where the disciples were, and she told Peter and John that the body had been stolen.

We get this from the Gospel of John. In the meantime, the other women, from whom

Mary had separated herself, continued on their way to the tomb, and there they found an angel there, and the angel told them that Jesus had risen from the dead and that they should go and carry a message to the other disciples, and so the women departed. In the meantime, Peter and John, who had been told by Mary Magdalene that the body had been stolen, came running to the tomb.

The other women had left by this time, and Peter and John arrive and find the tomb empty. They see what is there to be seen, and then they go away, sort of scratching their heads and trying to put it all together. Mary Magdalene, who had already told Peter and John about this, had been trailing behind them as they ran to the tomb, and they were gone by the time she got there.

She came back to the tomb, in other words. The women had been there and left. Peter and John had now been there and left, and now Mary comes there alone, and there at the tomb she sees Jesus.

She doesn't know it's him. She thinks it's a gardener, but she speaks to him, and he speaks to her, and finally she recognizes that this is Jesus, and he tells her, Don't cling to me because I have yet to ascend to my father, but go tell my brethren that I've risen from the dead and I'll be meeting them. So she does go to do so.

In the meantime, the other women who had already been to the tomb and were now going to tell the disciples a message, encounter Jesus on the road, and they grab his feet and worship him, and he gives them the same commission that he'd given to Mary, and that the angel had earlier given them to go and bring a message to the disciples. And so this harmonizes all the early material. We later find that Jesus appears to Peter, and then he later appears to some other women, and he appears on the road to Emmaus to two men who were walking there.

He appears to the twelve apostles minus Thomas, and then eight days later he appears to them with Thomas present, and so forth. This is how the accounts probably are to be harmonized. We only have part of that whole picture given to us by Matthew, and for that reason I wanted you to have a little bit of an idea of what the bigger picture was so that as we read Matthew, we will know some of the surrounding events that Matthew leaves out.

Matthew 28.1 says, Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. Actually, Mark and Luke tell us of other women that were with them as well, not just those two. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door and sat on it.

His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing was white as snow, and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to

the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he is risen.

As he said, Come, see the place where the Lord lay, and go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead, and indeed he is going before you into Galilee, there you will see him. Behold, I have told you. So they departed quickly from the tomb, with fear and great joy, and rang to bring his disciples word.

Now, let's talk about these verses that we've read. The first verse tells us that Mary and another Mary, and of course other gospels tell us there were not just the two of them, but others as well, several women were on their way to the tomb. It's Mark's gospel in Mark chapter 16 that tells us that they were discussing as they approached the tomb, who would roll the stone away for them.

However, that problem never had to be addressed, because by the time they got there, the stone had already been rolled away. The circumstances of it being rolled away are given to us in the form of sort of a flashback. In Matthew 28 verses 2 and 3, there was a great earthquake.

This earthquake probably did not occur while the women were there, because we read elsewhere that when the women arrived, that they found the tomb had been opened. This flashback simply tells us how it was that it came to be opened. There was a great earthquake, an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and moved the stone away, and sat on it.

Now, the removal of the stone, I think, had nothing to do with any intention of releasing Jesus from the tomb. He could get out easily enough. We find that at a later point, He is appearing and disappearing in certain rooms with the doors locked.

Jesus did not need open doors or remove stones to get in or out of a place. In His resurrection body, He was in a supernatural form, and therefore did not have any need of having the stone rolled away to let Him out. It's obvious, of course, that the reason the stone was moved is so that the disciples could get in, so that it could be viewed, so that the fact the tomb was empty could be witnessed and testified to.

And so the stone comes to be opened. We do not read at this point that Jesus was still in the tomb when the angel removed the stone. And if He was, we do not read of Him walking out.

We only read that the angel moved the stone and then sat there on the stone, and we get something of His appearance. His appearance is very glorious. His countenance or His face was like lightning, and His clothing was as white as snow, similar to the description of Jesus Himself on the Mount of Transfiguration.

A glorious and somewhat unnerving appearance, very unnerving to the guards. Now

remember the guards were there to prevent anyone from stealing the body. These were armed guards who were anticipating the apostles showing up because they thought they might try to steal the body and perpetrate a hoax that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Well, they had not counted on this visitor, and He comes and He opens the tomb, and it's quite obvious to them that there's nothing they can do to stop Him. In fact, it doesn't cross their mind to try to stop Him. They faint dead away when they see this messenger.

They become like dead men for fear. They come to again a little later on in verse 9, but we don't read of the guards again for a little while here because the women finally arrive at the tomb. Apparently, while the women arrive, the guards are laying around as if they were dead, having fainted, and the women find the tomb open, and they see the angel there.

Now, by the way, Luke and John tell us there were two angels there. That's not really a problem. An angel could be there, and he could have a companion there who is not mentioned all the time because the companion stood silently by.

But the fact is there were two angels there, and only one apparently did the speaking, so Matthew and Mark tell us only of that one. And it says, The angel answered and said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who is crucified. He's not here, for He is risen, as He said.

Come and see the place where the Lord lay. So the first thing the angel does is tell them to come and see that Jesus is not in the tomb because he's going to send them with a message. They're going to have to bear witness to something, and therefore, to witness something, you have to see something.

And so he shows them. Look here. Here's where Jesus was laying.

Where is He now? He's not here. He's gone. He's risen, just like He said He would.

You can see with your own eyes. His body is gone. And by the way, the absence of the body in the tomb is about the best evidence we have that Jesus rose from the dead, apart from a personal encounter with Him, which, by the way, these women later had, and so have I, and so have all true Christians.

Eventually, an encounter with Christ is the ultimate way of knowing that Jesus rose from the dead. But in terms of objective historical data, the best evidence we have that Jesus rose from the dead is that His tomb was empty. There was no one there witnessing with their eyes when Jesus arose or walked out of the tomb.

Many saw Him afterward, but none saw Him in the act of rising. But many who never saw Jesus after His resurrection still had opportunity to look in the tomb and see if it was empty. Now, of course, the tomb is empty and has been empty since this time.

The women were the first to see that it was empty. But they did not see Jesus immediately. They did a little later.

But the empty tomb itself was a tremendous witness to the resurrection of Christ because there is no explanation of it except for the resurrection of Christ that makes sense. We'll see a little later that the guards were paid to circulate a different story, but their story didn't make sense, not anywhere near as much sense as the resurrection of Christ makes. In any case, after the angel told them to look and see where He had been and that He was not there now, the angel said, Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead and indeed He is going before you into Galilee.

There you will see Him. Behold, I have told you. Now, he says, Go tell His disciples.

And in Mark's parallel gospel, it says, Go tell the disciples and Peter. Peter is singled out and mentioned in addition to the other disciples, very possibly because Peter was still smarting in his conscience over having denied the Lord three times and perhaps as an encouragement to Peter. He's specifically to be told that the angel wanted him to know that Jesus has risen from the dead.

In any case, there is a problem about these instructions. By the way, the instructions are uttered again later on by Jesus to the same women as we shall see. And that is, go tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and that He will meet them in Galilee.

Now, the reason this is problematic is because at this time they were not in Galilee. The women and Jesus and the disciples were all in Jerusalem at the other end of the country. Galilee was to the north a good week's journey.

Now, Jesus actually later the same day appeared to His disciples in the upper room. And that being so, it is strange that He said to the women, go tell the disciples I'll meet you in Galilee, when in fact He met them later the same day in Jerusalem, in the upper room. Why mention Galilee if He was actually going to run into them later the same day, not in Galilee? Well, it is a little problematic, but not too much.

You see, Jesus did appear to the apostles in the upper room. But there were many more disciples than just the apostles. The apostles were the leaders who were to lead the other disciples.

But the disciples of Jesus numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands. Because, remember, Jesus had ministered for over a year in Galilee, had healed many, had fed multitudes. There were many there who believed in Him.

Many of these people were probably not in Jerusalem at the time of His crucifixion, or had not witnessed it. And, of course, would not have witnessed His resurrection. And yet, they were believers in Him.

There were people like Jairus and his wife, whose daughter had been raised from the dead in Galilee. There were people like, well, there were a number of people, Zacchaeus and others. Well, actually, Zacchaeus probably lived in Perea or somewhere.

But the fact is that there were many hundreds, if not thousands, of Galileans who believed in Jesus. And, therefore, these women were told to go tell the disciples to anticipate a meeting of Jesus with those people in Galilee. Now, that Jesus would appear later the same day to His apostles and convince them of His resurrection would not be unthinkable, even though He was actually planning for a much bigger meeting of the larger group in Galilee.

And we do read from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that after Jesus rose from the dead, on one occasion He appeared to over 500 brethren at one time. Paul does not tell us where this appearance of Jesus took place. And it's not recorded in the Gospels, at least we're not told of the 500 brethren in any of the Gospels.

But the likelihood is that these 500 brethren were in Galilee because it is there that Jesus had the largest following. We're not sure He ever had so many as 500 followers in Jerusalem. But in Galilee He had thousands at one time.

So it is likely that the appearance of Jesus to 5,000 probably took place in Galilee. And it may have taken place because these women went and gathered the believers and said, listen, Jesus is going to appear to you. And I mean, why else would 500 be in one place at a time unless they were waiting for Him? It seems likely, at least to me, that this is so.

So that these women were told not necessarily just to tell the apostles that Jesus had risen and would meet them in Galilee since He was actually going to meet them sooner than that, closer than that. But rather they were given the mission of spreading the word throughout Galilee to the brethren there that Jesus would meet them. And so we read in verse 8, So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to bring His disciples' word.

And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, Rejoice! And they came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him. And Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.

Once again, He's speaking of the same thing the angel said, Tell My brethren, tell the disciples to go to Galilee, and I'll see them there. And this did happen, although that does not preclude Him appearing privately to the apostolic group earlier and here in Jerusalem, which He did, as we know from some of the other gospel accounts. Now in verse 11 it says, Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.

When they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a large sum of

money to the soldiers, saying, Tell them His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept. And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure. So they took the money and did as they were instructed, and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews to this day.

And thus we read of the beginning of that rumor, that the disciples stole the body of Jesus, a rumor which persists among some to this day, but is not at all reasonable. I can say that for reasons that I can discuss at a later time, probably in our next session, because we're low on time now. One thing I would observe and have you notice is that although all the four Gospels do record appearances of Jesus to people after His resurrection, not one of them actually records the event of the resurrection.

I mean, they record that the disciples came to an empty tomb and found it empty, and later they saw Jesus in various settings, but there is no record of the actual resurrection event. No one records how the dead body of Jesus sat upright, opened His eyes, came to life, and walked out of the tomb. And that's really remarkable when you consider that the resurrection of Jesus is the central affirmation of Christianity, that the evangelists who wrote the Gospels never described it.

And do you know why? Obviously because they were honest men. They didn't see it. No one saw it.

Jesus rose from the dead with no one watching, and therefore no one could describe it. You see, if these were fictions that were developed to try to purport a false idea as the basis of Christianity, certainly not all of the writers could have resisted the temptation to fictionalize a dramatic and sensational account of the resurrection actually taking place. The resurrection was itself a sensational event, but it's amazing the reticence and the sanity that is followed by the reporters of it.

They don't give any kind of detail. They don't fabricate anything because they weren't there. They only can report what actually happened.

And what did happen is wonderful enough that Jesus appeared to people after His resurrection, but it is so sane. It is so down to earth. It is so unsensationalized.

It is so historically reported. And it is a wonderful thing, really. It's one of those things that adds to the credibility of the gospel accounts, that none of the authors succumb to the temptation to write a fictional description of the most important event of all that they're recording, and that is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

They do not record it, but they do record what they did know, and that was that Jesus was seen by them, that He appeared to them, let them touch Him, He ate with them, and many other things like that. And this on many occasions, by the way. Jesus appeared many times after His resurrection to them, and as Luke tells us in Acts, He presented



many infallible proofs to them of His resurrection, none of which jibes with the story that the disciples stole the body, which was circulated later by the Jews and by the Romans.

We'll have more to say about that passage next time, but we've run out of time today, so tune in next time. We'll continue.