

Harmony Of The Gospels -- Lesson #14

The Resurrection, Appearances And Ascension Of Christ

Matthew 28:1-20; Mark 16:1-20; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25; Acts 1:3-9; 1 Corinthians 15:5-7

I. ***The Visit Of The Women To The Tomb Of Jesus (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-8; John 20:1)***

- A. "In the end of the sabbath" is a general time indicator; i.e., the women would not walk far during the sabbath, so they waited until after the sabbath. However, by then Saturday night was drawing on; so early on the first day of the week they went to "see the sepulchre."
- B. John mentions Mary Magdalene alone, though she came with the rest of the women. As she was the one who reported to John and Peter, he describes her actions, and makes no mention of the others.
- C. Though Mary came with the other women, she departed at once, while the others stayed. The narrative tells what happened to the other women after Mary had departed.
- D. Jesus had already arisen. The stone was rolled back, the seal broken and the soldiers made helpless -- not to let the risen Messiah escape, but to let in the first witnesses.
- E. The angel speaks words that allay the women's fears. While the empty tomb by itself is capable of several explanations, the explanatory word of Matthew narrows the potential interpretations down to one: Jesus had risen from the dead (vs. 6), a truth to be confirmed by personal appearances.
- F. The women were told to hasten, for the disciples were not to endure their sorrow a moment longer than was needful. Peter was mentioned by name that he might know that he was not cast off for his denial.

II. ***Mary Magdalene And The Other Women Report To The Apostles And Peter And John Visit The Empty Tomb (Luke 24:9-12; John 20:2-10)***

- A. At this point Luke reports the names of the women (cf. 8:1-3). While the witness of women was not acceptable in those days, nevertheless Luke records their testimony.
- B. The reluctance to believe has an important relation to the evidences for the resurrection. The disciples were not expecting that event. They cannot thus be appropriate subjects for hallucination, as some would have them be. The strips of linen in the tomb used in the burial of Jesus bear their silent but eloquent testimony to the absence of Jesus' body.

- C. John shows that he and Peter started for the tomb as soon as they received the message of Mary Magdalene, but Luke is less exact, blending her message with that of the other women. The quick response of Peter and John shows that the disciples were not responsible for removing the body. Had they been aware of an official removal, or had some of their own number been involved in a conspiracy, they would not have been so concerned.
- D. Peter must have been wondering why the graveclothes were left in position if the body had been stolen. A robber would not have left them in good order. He would have stripped the body completely, leaving the clothing in a disorderly heap; or he would have taken the body, graveclothes and all.
- E. Assured that the grave was now empty, and emboldened by the example of Peter, John now entered it, and as he looked upon the empty tomb, the truth flashed upon his mind that Jesus Himself had removed the bandages, and had Himself departed from the tomb as the first-born from the dead.

III. *The Appearance Of Jesus To Mary Magdalene And The Message To The Disciples (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18)*

- A. Mary carried out the command of the angel given in Mark 16:7. She found the disciples in a state of mourning (vs. 10) -- but not for long. Her witness to them was that Jesus was alive, and she knew it to be so because she had seen Him. Mark particularly emphasizes the unbelief of the disciples. The reluctance of the disciples to believe her is certainly understandable (vs. 11; cf. Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:11).
- B. Mary Magdalene had returned to the tomb and stood outside, wailing for the loss of Jesus. Upon looking into the tomb, she saw two figures in white seated on the shelf where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the foot and the other at the head.
- C. Before the angels can speak the glad news to Mary, Jesus Himself becomes His own messenger. As Mary turned back toward the outside of the tomb, she saw a person standing there whom she took for the keeper of the garden. She was aware of His presence, but paid scant attention to Him because of her overwhelming concern for the body of Jesus.
- D. In reply to her action, Jesus said, "Touch me not." He was not refusing to be touched but was making clear that she did not need to detain Him, for He had not yet ascended to the Father. He planned to remain with the disciples for a little while; she need not fear that He would vanish immediately. Ultimately He would return to God, and He urged her to tell the disciples that He would do so.

IV. *The Appearance Of Jesus To The Other Women (Matthew 28:9-10)*

- A. This appearance of Jesus came after the women had reported the angel's message to the disciples (Luke 24:9-11). On this second appearance, Jesus gave the women essentially the same directions that the angel had delivered in Matthew 28:7.
- B. The delay of the women due to the worshipping of the Lord was permitted them, but was denied to Mary. This probably explains why she became the first messenger, though the other women were first to leave the tomb.
- C. "Brethren" probably does not refer only to the eleven but to all those attached to His cause who were then in Jerusalem, most of whom had followed Him from Galilee to Jerusalem as His "disciples."

V. *Some Of The Guard Report To The Jewish Rulers (Matthew 28:11-15)*

- A. While Joanna and the group of women with her were on their way to tell the apostles that they had seen Jesus, the guard came into the city.
- B. This was evidently not a full, but a select, council of the Sanhedrin. They willfully shut their eyes to the fact that Jesus had risen, and proceeded to purchase a lie to conceal the truth.
- C. The self-contradictory nature of the account they were to circulate (as if a sleeping soldier would know what had happened, or that all would have been sleeping at once, or that Roman soldiers would incriminate themselves in this way) makes its acceptance incredible.
- D. The words seem to indicate that it was published more largely than simply within the walls of Jerusalem. In his dialogue with Trypho, which was written about A.D. 170, Justin Martyr says that the Jews dispersed the story by means of special messengers sent to every country. The fear which they expressed to Pilate in Matthew 27:64 lends credibility to this statement.

VI. *The Appearance To The Disciples On The Road To Emmaus (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-32)*

- A. Emmaus was probably around seven miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. Jesus Himself restrained their vision, that, unlike John (John 20:8-9), they might see the resurrection of Jesus in the scriptures before they saw it in reality.
- B. The event of the death of Jesus was so well known that these two men could not understand how even a casual visitor in the city would not have heard of it. To Cleopas, redeeming Israel meant freeing the na-

tion from the Roman yoke. They had not come into the full realization of His deity.

- C. The bewilderment of the disciples was increased by the report of the women. They could not very well deny the truth of the report; yet there was no positive evidence of resuscitation.
- D. Jesus intimated that the events of the past week should have been no surprise to them. The Messiah would logically be expected to suffer and to enter into glory, for the Old Testament had foreshadowed it. From the first of Genesis to the last of Zechariah there were scattered prophecies of the coming Messiah.
- E. While He was breaking the bread to supply their bodies He opened their eyes and revealed to them that it was He also who had been feeding their hungry hearts with the truth and consolation of the divine word. They admitted to each other that the joy of beholding the risen Lord was the consummation of a joy already begun through a right understanding of the truth contained in scripture.

VII. *The Report Of The Two Disciples And The News Of The Appearance To Peter (Luke 24:33-35; 1 Corinthians 15:5)*

- A. Their news was too precious to keep and they could not keep still until the disciples in Jerusalem knew it. They proclaimed the reality of the resurrection; it was not a hallucination of the women. The two disciples especially spoke of recognizing Jesus when He broke bread with them.
- B. Their journey to Emmaus may have been a sample of the dispersion that would have taken place had not the disciples been held together in Jerusalem by the hope of further appearances of Christ.
- C. No record of the appearance of Jesus to Peter has been preserved, except one allusion in 1 Corinthians 15:5. Paul's reference to the appearance to Peter may have been influenced by the presence of a party devoted to Peter in Corinth. If such was the case, Paul's statement may have reminded this group that Peter also preached the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

VIII. *The Appearance To The Disciples With Thomas Absent (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25)*

- A. The third episode came in the evening of the first day. John does not cite the appearances to Simon and to the travelers on the road to Emmaus. This appearance came to the collective group in order to allay their fears. The appearance of Jesus in the room resulted in both amazement and fear. The implication is clear that Jesus was not impeded by locked doors.

- B. "As my Father hath sent me," He said, "even so send I you." He had come into the world to fulfill the Father's purpose: to speak His words, to do His works and to lay down His life for our salvation; now He expected them to continue His work in His absence by delivering His message (John 15:27), doing greater works than He had done (John 14:12) and giving their lives in His service.
- C. His hands, feet and side not only showed that He was not a disembodied spirit, but they served to identify His body with that which they had seen crucified, and hence the person who now spoke was the Jesus whom they had known and lost.
- D. Symbolic of the baptism which they were to receive at Pentecost, He breathes upon them, and, having symbolically qualified them, He commissions them to forgive or retain sin, which is the subject matter of the New Testament.
- E. Thomas is singled out for special treatment because his confession provides a climactic illustration of the triumph of belief. In spite of the repeated assurances of his colleagues that Jesus had risen, Thomas was obstinate. So certain was he of the death of Jesus that he insisted he would not believe unless he could actually touch Jesus' body. Thomas would be satisfied by nothing less than material evidence. His skepticism is testimony to the fact that the resurrection appearances were not illusions induced by wishful thinking.

IX. *The Appearance To The Disciples With Thomas Present (John 20:26-31; 1 Corinthians 15:5)*

- A. Jesus did not immediately upbraid him for his doubts, but He challenged him to perform the test that he had suggested. This is the first confession of Christ as God. It should be said in Thomas' favor that if his doubts were the heaviest, his confession of faith was the fullest. He had more doubts as to the resurrection because it meant more to him; it meant that Jesus was God Himself.
- B. While rejoicing in the belief of Thomas, Jesus pronounced a beatitude upon the countless number of believers in His resurrection who were not witnesses of it.
- C. Starting with the proposition that Jesus, as the Word, was God, he comes here to the climax of Thomas' confession that Jesus is God, and the beatitude of Jesus upon those of a like faith. He then declares that he has written his book that men might have his faith, and the eternal life to which it leads.
- D. This conclusion ties together the three persistent themes of the gospel: the "signs" that demonstrate Christ's nature and power; the response of "belief" that is exemplified in the crises and growth in the

lives of the disciples; and the new "life" that is found in the relationship with Christ.

X. ***The Appearance To Seven Disciples Beside The Sea Of Galilee (John 21:1-25)***

- A. John is the only New Testament writer to use the name "Sea of Tiberias" for the Sea of Galilee. The movements of large bodies of fish in the waters of Galilee are frequently visible to one standing on the shore. If a stranger saw fish upon the right side of the boat, the disciples would readily obey his command, without suspecting who it was that gave it.
- B. "The disciple whom Jesus loved" was the first one to recognize the mysterious stranger on the shore as none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. Peter's quick reaction revealed his real feeling toward Jesus. John tells us the exact number of the fishes to show the magnitude of the miracle, both as to the catch and as to the unbroken nets.
- C. This was Christ's seventh appearance, but His third appearance to a group of disciples, and the third appearance witnessed by John.
- D. Jesus now embarks in a discussion with Peter that has been the cause of much debate. The first two questions of Jesus use *agape* while the third question uses *phileo*. In all three of Peter's responses, he uses the term *phileo*, leading some to conclude that Peter is only pledging a lesser form of brotherly affection instead of a deep, caring love. However, this distinction is unlikely. The three affirmations of Peter's love for the Lord reminds one of his three denials of Jesus.
- E. The words of Jesus predicted Peter's career: a new responsibility, a new danger and a violent death. Jesus placed Peter in a category with Himself -- a life spent for God and ultimately sacrificed to glorify God (cf. John 12:27-32; 13:31).
- F. Peter's question concerning John reflects curiosity and possibly uneasiness. Peter had been given an important commission, but what would his friend be expected to do? Would he share equally in both the responsibilities and the perils of the same task? His reply indicated that even if he intended that John should outlive Peter, Peter's main concern should not be a comparison of his lot with that of his friend; rather, Peter's concern should be the fulfillment of Jesus' purpose.

XI. ***The Appearance To The Disciples On Mountain In Galilee With A First Commission (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-20)***

- A. These final verses of this gospel recapitulate many of Matthew's themes, tying up several loose ends. Matthew does not record any other appearance of Jesus to His apostles, so it seems reasonable to think that he includes the doubts of Thomas in his comments. The re-

buke Jesus gave His disciples here is particularly severe -- more severe, in fact, than any other rebuke elsewhere in the gospels.

- B. The word "authority" means all the right of absolute authority, and all the force of absolute power. Jesus utters a very transcendent claim. Realizing His authority, His disciples should be eager to go forth and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- C. Belief and baptism are so closely associated that they are conceived of as virtually a single act. When both occur, the result is salvation. We are brought into a divine relationship with God. Refusal to believe results in judgment. One of the primary themes of this entire section (vss. 9-20) is the importance of belief and the sinfulness of unbelief.
- D. The book of Acts gives examples of each one of these signs except the fourth, and although we have no record of a disciple escaping the effects of drinking poison, there is little doubt that in many persecutions such cases did occur.
- E. The promise in Matthew 28:20 is not a promise of mere companionship, but of full sympathy and support (Isaiah 43:2; Exodus 33:15; Joshua 1:5). The duration of this promise shows that it is intended for all disciples.
- F. "After the Lord had spoken unto them" in Mark 16:19 may refer to vss. 15-18 or to some other occasion. The ascension had been predicted by Jesus (cf. Mark 14:7) and was witnessed by the apostles (cf. Acts 1:9); his sitting at God's right hand was a matter of faith but firmly believed and preached in the early church (cf. Acts 2:33-35; 7:56). There is nothing like vs. 20 in any of the gospels. It sounds more like a summary statement from the book of Acts of the activities of the apostles.

XII. *The Appearance To About Five Hundred Brethren (1 Corinthians 15:6)*

- A. The reference to "the greater part" who "remain unto this present" has immense apologetic value. The resurrection was undisputed, so far as we know, twenty-five years later!
- B. To imagine that as many as five hundred of His disciples would gather to see the risen Lord is not difficult. If the appearance recorded in Matthew 28:7, 10, 16-20 is not the one to which Paul was referring, this resurrection appearance is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

XIII. *The Appearance To James The Brother Of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7)*

- A. The James referred to by Paul is unquestionably the Lord's brother. We do not know when this appearance took place. It is mentioned in the apocryphal work *The Gospel According To The Hebrews*.

- B. This resurrection appearance is the best explanation of the change in Jesus's brothers. During His ministry, His brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5); in fact, they considered Him to be insane (Mark 3:20-21).
- C. Shortly after the establishment of the church; however, James is referred to as one of the important people in the church at Jerusalem (Galatians 1:10).

XIV. *The Last Appearance And The Ascension (Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:3-9)*

- A. Luke sums up the whole commission by recording the words of Christ, wherein He states that He suffered that it might be preached to all nations that if men would repent, God would now forgive (Romans 3:26). From Luke's record we also learn that the preaching of these glad tidings was to begin at Jerusalem.
- B. The phrase, "while I was yet," shows that in the mind of Jesus He had already departed from them, and His presence was the exception and not the rule. Some believe that Jesus opening the minds of the disciples was supernatural, but the text shows that He did it by teaching, just as He had already done to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.
- C. Despite all that they had seen and heard, the apostles were still expecting that Jesus would revive the old Jewish kingdom, and have Himself enthroned in Jerusalem as the heir and successor to David. Jesus details their duty, but does not explain the nature of His kingdom. Pentecost would make everything clear as to the nature of Christ's rule and dominion.
- D. The mandate to preach stands as the theme for the whole of Acts. It comes directly from Jesus Himself -- in fact, it is His final and conclusive word to His disciples before His ascension. All that follows in Acts is the result of Jesus' own intent and the fulfillment of His express word.
- E. For Jesus' ascension Luke simply says that he "was taken up" and he tells us very little else about it. Not even the place where the ascension occurred is mentioned in vs. 9, though in vs. 12 Luke says it took place on the Mount of Olives. More important for Luke than the description of the ascension is its significance, and this he gives us in saying that a "cloud received him out of their sight."