



The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A Chronological Sequence of Events

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The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A Chronological Sequence of Events

John M. Cimbala

[*Note:* This material was compiled for use in a Sunday School class or a small group Bible study. A handout for such a study, along with a leader's guide, is provided at the end of this document.]

Introduction:

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is of paramount importance to our Christian faith. The Apostle Paul states this emphatically in **1 Corinthians 15:12-14**, “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” If Paul were using a modern idiom, he might have said, “If the resurrection of Jesus did not occur, we might as well go home!” In other words, if there were no resurrection, why waste time with church, Bible study, or anything else related to Christianity? Many skeptics and atheists point to *apparent contradictions* in the four gospel accounts of the resurrection as evidence that the Bible is not true and that the resurrection never took place. Does it even *matter* if the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the four gospels contradict each other? If the Bible is truly inspired by God and is infallible, inerrant, etc. (as given in the original manuscripts), then it should *not* have any errors or legitimate contradictions. Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most important events in human history, is a foundation of Christian faith, and is reported by all four gospel writers, *no* legitimate contradictions in the resurrection accounts provided in the four gospels would be expected.

There are certainly *differences* in the four gospel accounts of the resurrection, as any casual reader can see. They were written by four unique individuals, only two of whom (Matthew and John) were part of Jesus' group of twelve apostles. As with any passages of scripture, we believe that all four of these resurrection accounts are inspired (God-breathed) and reliable (**2 Timothy 3:16**). We begin our study by carefully reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for comparison. All Bible quotes in this

document are from the New International Version (NIV). They are color-coded, which becomes important later when we combine sentences from all four gospels into one narrative.

Matthew 28:1-10. After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 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.” So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Mark 16:1-8. 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. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “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. 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.’” Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Luke 24:1-12. 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. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 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? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 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.

John 20:1-18. 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. 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!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two

angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 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.

Close examination of the four accounts shows many *similarities* (non-contradictions), which give confidence that they are true and reliable. For example, the events took place on the first day of the week (Sunday) very early in the morning. Mary Magdalene is a prominent character, mentioned in all four accounts. Angels were present, the tomb was empty, and Jesus appeared to one or more women. Careful study of the four gospel accounts yields additional similarities.

Comparing the four accounts also shows some obvious *differences* (statements that on first glance appear to be inconsistencies or discrepancies). We list some of these here: Who was with Mary Magdalene? Was there one angel or two? What was the location of the angel(s) – on top of the stone or inside the tomb? What did the angel(s) say to Mary? What did Jesus say to her? Is the timing/sequence/chronology of events inconsistent among the four accounts? Again, careful study and comparison of the four gospel accounts yield additional differences, which we shall refer to as *apparent contradictions*.

Let's address some of these apparent contradictions. We first examine which women came to the empty tomb of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday morning.

- **Matthew:** See also **Matthew 27:55-56**, where it says that the women at the cross were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Then Chapter 28 of Matthew's account (copied above) states that Mary Magdalene and the *other* Mary went to look at the tomb. We conclude from these two passages that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph came to the tomb early in the morning. This does *not* preclude other women being there, however.
- **Mark:** See also **Mark 15:40**, where it states that the women at the cross were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph [a variant of the name Joseph], and Salome. Chapter 16 of Mark's account (copied above) tells us that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to Jesus' tomb. When compared to Matthew, this implies that Salome was the mother of the sons of Zebedee, i.e., the mother of James and John. It is also generally accepted by biblical scholars that Salome was Zebedee's wife and the mother of James and John. Note also that "Mary the mother of James" refers to a *different* James (James the Lesser or James the Younger) from the James of brothers James and John, whose mother was Salome. This Mary is probably the same one who was mother of James and Joseph in Matthew's account. So now we have three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome the mother of James and John.
- **Luke:** Luke identifies the women as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them. So, apparently there were *more* than three women there. Joanna is mentioned only by Luke. Again, Mary the mother of James is probably the same person as Mary the mother of James and Joseph in Matthew's account. So now we have *four* women who are named: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Salome the mother of James and John, and Joanna. Luke's use of the word "others" indicates a minimum of *five* women who went to the tomb that glorious morning.

- **John:** John mentions only Mary Magdalene in his account. John neither names nor mentions any of the other women. This does not contradict that other women were there, however. John chose not to mention them because his narrative focuses on Mary Magdalene and on the apostles Peter and John.

Do the gospel differences concerning the number of women or their identities constitute any legitimate contradictions? No. Keep in mind that some of the women may have arrived at the tomb at different times and/or from different directions. Women came to the tomb, some remained, some left, and some returned a second time, as we point out later. **We conclude that there are no legitimate contradictions regarding the women who came to Jesus' empty tomb on that first Resurrection Sunday.**

Next, we examine the angels. Matthew mentions only one angel, who rolled away the stone and then sat on it. Matthew tells us that this angel spoke to the women. Mark also mentions one angel (referring to him as a young man dressed in a white robe), who was not sitting on the stone, but was inside the empty tomb. Mark also states that this angel spoke to the women. Luke mentions *two* angels (referring to them as two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning), who were standing inside the empty tomb. These angels (or at least one of them) addressed the women. Finally, John mentions two angels inside the tomb, who were sitting, not standing. John writes that these angels spoke to Mary Magdalene, but he makes no mention of the other women.

Do these differences concerning the angels constitute any legitimate contradictions between the gospel accounts? No. One angel was sitting on the stone after rolling it away, as mentioned by Matthew. But he could have moved from that position and gone into the empty tomb, where he joined a second angel. It is also possible that this first angel left the scene completely and two *other* angels were inside the tomb. These two angels were apparently standing some of the time and sitting some of the time. **We conclude that there are no legitimate contradictions regarding the number or locations of the angels who were present at Jesus' empty tomb on that first Resurrection Sunday.**

Finally, we address the sequence of events on that first Resurrection Sunday. After much careful study, comparing the four gospel accounts side by side, I came up with a sequence of events (in chronological order) that has no contradictions and that can be reconciled with all four gospel accounts. This sequence is provided as a stand-alone summary on the next page. Following that summary, the color-coded gospel accounts are strung together into one narrative. The colors are so that readers can identify the source (which gospel account) of each sentence or phrase. Every word of each of the four gospel accounts is included in this narrative, so there is by necessity some repetition. The narrative is in proper sequence, however, and agrees with my proposed chronology.

Resurrection events in chronological order with no contradictions:

Compiled by John M. Cimbala, latest revision 16 May 2019.

Below is a possible chronology for the Sunday of Jesus' resurrection which was compiled by carefully comparing the four gospel accounts of the events.

1. An earthquake occurs, and an angel rolls away the stone.
2. The guards are terrified and momentarily stunned (apparently, the guards run away since there is no mention of them after the women arrive).
3. Jesus comes out of the tomb at some point before anyone else arrives at the tomb.
4. Mary Magdalene and at least two other women (Joanna and the other Mary) visit the tomb early in the morning. Mary realizes that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Mary is alarmed at the sight and thinks that someone has stolen Jesus' body.
5. Mary Magdalene (perhaps by herself) runs back to report to Peter and John what she has seen. The other women who were with Mary when they went to the tomb apparently stayed at the tomb.
6. Around this time, some other women arrive at the tomb. Note that the women may have been coming from different homes and at different times; not all of them necessarily traveled together.
7. These other women, and those who had arrived earlier but stayed at the tomb while Mary ran back, also see that the stone is rolled away. They enter the tomb and see an angel who tells them that Jesus has risen. The angel also tells them to go quickly to tell the apostles what has happened.
8. These other women are fearful at first and are afraid to speak to anyone. Later, however, they gain enough courage to speak about what they have seen and heard.
9. These women run back to tell Peter and John and the rest of the eleven apostles.
10. Mary Magdalene reaches Peter and John and tells them that someone took Jesus' body out of the tomb.
11. The other women also arrive at the place where the apostles are staying and report what they have seen. Luke identifies the ones who went back and told Peter and John: "It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles."
12. Peter and John run toward the tomb. Mary Magdalene and possibly Joanna, the other Mary, and perhaps other women either run with them or are close behind, heading for the tomb.
13. John arrives at the tomb before Peter. John stays outside of the tomb initially, but Peter goes straight in. Then John also enters the tomb. They see the strips of burial linens and the head cloth lying in the tomb. John believes Jesus has risen. It is not clear what Peter believes at this time.
14. At some point while Peter and John are at the tomb, Mary also arrives at the tomb.
15. Both Peter and John leave the tomb.
16. Mary Magdalene lingers at the tomb, crying.
17. Mary Magdalene looks into the tomb and sees two angels. They ask why she is crying. She tells them that someone has taken Jesus' body.
18. Mary Magdalene turns around and sees Jesus but does not recognize him until he says her name. He tells her to go tell the disciples.
19. Mary Magdalene runs to tell the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord!
20. At some point during these events with Mary Magdalene, all or some of the other women also leave the tomb to tell the apostles what they have seen. The other Mary may have been with Mary Magdalene, or perhaps these two women who shared the name Mary met up with each other as they ran from the tomb.
21. On their way, the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene and at least one of the other women (the other Mary, according to Matthew). They cling to him; he tells them to go tell the disciples that he has risen and to meet him in Galilee.

Do these differences concerning the sequence of events constitute any legitimate contradictions between the four gospel accounts? No. The above sequence is compatible with each of the four gospel accounts. If readers are still not convinced, they should read each gospel account again, one at a time, while following the above sequence. **We conclude that there are no legitimate contradictions regarding the sequence of events on that first Resurrection Sunday.**

A blend of all four gospel accounts of the resurrection into one (in chronological order):

Compiled by John M. Cimbala, latest revision 16 May 2019.

Below is a single narrative of a possible sequence of events that occurred on the Sunday of Jesus' resurrection. The composite was compiled by carefully combining the four gospel accounts of the resurrection events. Every sentence or phrase was cut and pasted from the four color-coded gospel accounts that were provided previously. When necessary, clarifications or comments were added in square brackets by the author.

The color code is as follows: **Matthew**, **Mark**, **Luke**, **John**, [*clarifications and comments*].

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. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb... After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. But when they [*the women*] looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ...and [*Mary Magdalene*] saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she [*Mary Magdalene*] came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved... They [*the other women who either came with Mary or arrived separately and remained at the tomb*] found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "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. 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.'" The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 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." In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men [*the angels*] said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words. Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ...and [*Mary Magdalene, who had arrived where the apostles were staying*] said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" When they [*the other women, who arrived shortly after Mary Magdalene*] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. So Peter and the other disciple [*John*] started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Bending over, he

saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. *[Mary Magdalene apparently followed Peter and John to the tomb, and in the following passage she was at the tomb for the second time. Some of the other women were there, too.]* Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" *[Mary Magdalene and at least one of the other women (the other Mary) left the tomb and were on their way to the disciples.]* Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." 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.

**Handout for Sunday School or Bible Study
(see next pages):**

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A Chronological Sequence of Events

Compiled by John M. Cimbala, latest revision 16 May 2019.

- **Discussion Starter:** Does it matter if the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the four gospels contradict each other?
- **Introduction:**
 - The resurrection of Jesus is of paramount importance to our Christian faith. See **1 Corinthians 15:12-14**.
 - Many skeptics and atheists point to contradictions in the four gospel accounts of the resurrection as evidence that the Bible is not true and that the resurrection never took place.
 - Let's read the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and see for ourselves (from the NIV):

Matthew 28:1-10. After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 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." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Mark 16:1-8. 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. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "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. 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.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Luke 24:1-12. 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. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 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? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 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.

John 20:1-18. 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. 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!" So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 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.

- **Bible Study:**

- List some similarities (non-contradictions – things of which we can be confident).

- List some differences (things that look like contradictions or things that are apparently out of order).

- Which women came to the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, according to the four gospel writers?
 - Matthew: (see also Matthew 27:55-56)
 - Mark: (see also Mark 15:40)
 - Luke:
 - John:
- Is it possible to come up with a sequence of events that has **no contradictions**? Break up into groups of three or four people. Each group should spend about 15 minutes or so attempting to come up with a sequence. Afterward, each group should give a brief summary of its proposed sequence.

- **Lesson Summary:** If Christ has not been raised, our teaching is u_____ and so is your f_____.

- **Discussion Questions:**

- Who was Mary Magdalene, and why was she so devoted to Jesus? See **Luke 8:1-2**.
- Why do you think Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as the first person to see him after the resurrection?
- Why was Mary unable to recognize Jesus?
- Why did Jesus tell Mary to stop clinging to him?

- What did John see that caused him to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead?
- Why is Jesus' resurrection one of the most important events in human history?
- **For Further Study:** Using a word processor, cut and paste portions (whole sentences or parts of sentences) from each of the four gospel accounts into one continuous narrative that agrees with the sequence of events you came up with. It is recommended that before you do this, you color-code the four accounts (e.g., [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), Luke, [John](#)) so that you can see the source of each portion of your narrative.

**Leader's Guide for
Sunday School or Bible Study**

**[Suggested answers and comments are in square brackets in red or blue.
Direct scripture quotes are in green.]**

(see next pages):

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- **Discussion Starter:** Does it matter if the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the four gospels contradict each other? [If the Bible is truly inspired by God and infallible, inerrant, etc., then we should not have any legitimate contradictions. The resurrection of Jesus is one of the most important events in human history, so we would certainly hope there is no conflict. Let's take a look and see what potential conflicts exist.]
- **Introduction**
 - The resurrection of Jesus is of paramount importance to our Christian faith. See **1 Corinthians 15:12-14**. [Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15:12-14**, "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Paul is pretty emphatic here, and if the resurrection is not true, we might as well go home.]
 - Many skeptics and atheists point to contradictions in the four gospel accounts of the resurrection as evidence that the Bible is not true and that the resurrection never took place.
 - Let's read the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and see for ourselves (from the NIV):

Matthew 28:1-10. After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 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." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Mark 16:1-8. 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. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "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. 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.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Luke 24:1-12. 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. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 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? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 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.

John 20:1-18. 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. 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!" So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying

there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 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.

- **Bible Study:**

- List some similarities (non-contradictions – things of which we can be confident).
[First day of the week, right at sunrise, Mary Magdalene went there (along with a few friends), angels were present, the stone was rolled back, the tomb was empty, etc. There are some others that students may mention.]
- List some differences (statements that look like contradictions or that are apparently out of order).
[The timing/sequence of events seems to be inconsistent among the four accounts: one angel vs. two, location of the angels, who was with Mary Magdalene [discussed in more detail in the next question], what the angel(s) said to Mary, what Jesus said to her, etc. There are some others that students may mention.]
- Which women came to the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, according to the four gospel writers?
 - Matthew: (see also Matthew 27:55-56) [In Chapter 27, it says that the women at the cross were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Then in Chapter 28 (copied above), it says Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. Matthew therefore says that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph went to the tomb.]
 - Mark: (see also Mark 15:40) [Mark 15:40 says that the women at the cross were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. Mark 16 says Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. When compared to Matthew, this implies that Salome was the mother of the sons of Zebedee, i.e., the mother of James and John. It is also generally accepted by scholars that Salome was Zebedee's wife and the mother of James and John. Also, "Mary the mother of James" was a different James (James the Lesser or James the Younger) from James and John, whose mother was Salome. This Mary is probably the same one who was mother of James and Joseph in Matthew's account.]
 - Luke: [Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them. So, apparently there were more than three women there. Joanna is mentioned only by Luke. Again, Mary the mother of James is probably the same one as Mary the mother of James and Joseph in Matthew's account.]
 - John: [John mentions only Mary Magdalene and none of the other women. This does not contradict that other women were there, however. John just chose not to mention them.]
- Is it possible to come up with a sequence of events that has **no contradictions**? Break up into groups of three or four people. Each group should spend about 15 minutes or so attempting to come up with a sequence. Afterward, each group should give a brief summary of its proposed sequence.
[Below is an example sequence:]

1. An earthquake occurs, and an angel rolls away the stone.
2. The guards are terrified and momentarily stunned (apparently, the guards run away since there is no mention of them after the women arrive).
3. Jesus comes out of the tomb at some point before anyone else arrives at the tomb.
4. Mary Magdalene and at least two other women (Joanna and the other Mary) visit the tomb early in the morning. Mary realizes that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Mary is alarmed at the sight and thinks that someone has stolen Jesus' body.
5. Mary Magdalene (perhaps by herself) runs back to report to Peter and John what she has seen. The other women who were with Mary when they went to the tomb apparently stayed at the tomb.
6. Around this time, some other women arrive at the tomb. Note that the women may have been coming from different homes and at different times; not all of them necessarily traveled together.
7. These other women, and those who had arrived earlier but stayed at the tomb while Mary ran back, also see that the stone is rolled away. They enter the tomb and see an angel who tells them that Jesus has risen. The angel also tells them to go quickly to tell the apostles what has happened.
8. These other women are fearful at first and are afraid to speak to anyone. Later, however, they gain enough courage to speak about what they have seen and heard.
9. These women run back to tell Peter and John and the rest of the eleven apostles.
10. Mary Magdalene reaches Peter and John and tells them that someone took Jesus' body out of the tomb.
11. The other women also arrive at the place where the apostles are staying and report what they have seen. Luke identifies the ones who went back and told Peter and John: "It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles."
12. Peter and John run toward the tomb. Mary Magdalene and possibly Joanna, the other Mary, and perhaps other women either run with them or are close behind, heading for the tomb.
13. John arrives at the tomb before Peter. John stays outside of the tomb initially, but Peter goes straight in. Then John also enters the tomb. They see the strips of burial linens and the head cloth lying in the tomb. John believes Jesus has risen. It is not clear what Peter believes at this time.
14. At some point while Peter and John are at the tomb, Mary Magdalene also arrives at the tomb.
15. Both Peter and John leave the tomb.
16. Mary Magdalene lingers at the tomb, crying.
17. Mary Magdalene looks into the tomb and sees two angels. They ask why she is crying. She tells them that someone has taken Jesus' body.
18. Mary Magdalene turns around and sees Jesus but does not recognize him until he says her name. He tells her to go tell the disciples.
19. Mary Magdalene runs to tell the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord!
20. At some point during these events with Mary Magdalene, all or some of the other women also leave the tomb to tell the apostles what they have seen. The other Mary may have been with Mary Magdalene, or perhaps these two women who shared the name Mary met up with each other as they ran from the tomb.
21. On their way, the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene and at least one of the other women (the other Mary, according to Matthew). They cling to him; he tells them to go tell the disciples that he has risen and to meet him in Galilee.

- **Lesson Summary:** If Christ has not been raised, our teaching is useless and so is your faith.

- **Discussion Questions**

- Who was Mary Magdalene, and why was she so devoted to Jesus? See **Luke 8:1-2**. [Luke 8 says "...some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out...". So, Mary Magdalene had been horribly demon-possessed, and Jesus delivered her.]
- Why do you think Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as the first person to see him after the resurrection? [Perhaps to give more equality to women, who were not considered very valuable at the time. Perhaps to reward her for coming to the tomb to care for his body after death. Perhaps to test the faith of the disciples. Other reasons?]
- Why was Mary unable to recognize Jesus? [She was not expecting him. She was crying, looking out from a dark tomb into the sky, perhaps still almost dark, it would have been hard to recognize Jesus in the shadows. Jesus' new resurrected body must have looked different from his original body – as we read in **Luke 24:13-**

31; the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him even when he sat down at the table to eat with them.]

- Why did Jesus tell Mary to stop clinging to him? [She had work to do – to go and tell others! Also, her relationship with Jesus from here on is no longer physical but spiritual. In other words, Jesus may have been telling Mary not to be selfish but to go and spread the good news; don't waste any more time. After the Resurrection, Jesus was physically present for only a short time (40 days). All Christians since then have needed to function without the bodily presence of Jesus, having only the Word and the Holy Spirit.]
- What did John see that caused him to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? [The way the grave clothes were in-tact. It obviously did not look like anyone stole Jesus' body and took off the wrappings. It also did not look like Jesus himself took off the wrappings. He apparently went *through* the wrappings without disturbing them.]
- Why is Jesus' resurrection one of the most important events in human history? [Many reasons, especially concerning our faith, as discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 (see above). Christianity has changed the world for the better. It gives us hope for eternal life. Other reasons?]
- **For Further Study:** Using a word processor, cut and paste portions (whole sentences or parts of sentences) from each of the four gospel accounts into one continuous narrative that agrees with the sequence of events you came up with. It is recommended that before you do this, you color-code the four accounts (e.g., Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) so that you can see the source of each portion of your narrative.

[Below is an example narrative: The color code is as follows: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, [clarifications and comments]]

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. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb... After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. But when they [the women] looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ...and [Mary Magdalene] saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she [Mary Magdalene] came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved... They [the other women who either came with Mary or arrived separately and remained at the tomb] found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "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. 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.'" The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 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." In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men [the angels] said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words. Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ...and [Mary Magdalene, who had arrived where the apostles were staying] said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" When they [the other women, who arrived shortly after Mary Magdalene] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. So Peter and the other disciple

[John] started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. *[Mary Magdalene apparently followed Peter and John and was now back at the tomb, and stayed there. Some of the other women were there, too.]* Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" *[Mary Magdalene and at least one of the other women (the other Mary) left the tomb and were on their way to the disciples.]* Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." 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.

About the Author

John M. Cimbala was born in 1957 in Pittsburgh, PA. After graduating from Norwin High School in North Huntingdon, PA, he attended Penn State, where he received his BS in Aerospace Engineering in 1979. He then went to Caltech in Pasadena, CA, where he received his MS in Aeronautics in 1980. He married his college sweetheart Suzy that same year and then earned his PhD in Aeronautics in 1984. Since then, he has served on the faculty of Penn State as Professor of Mechanical Engineering, teaching and conducting research. He and Suzy raised two sons, Andy and Luke Cimbala. At the time of this writing, he has two grandchildren, but he hopes for many more. John has taught Sunday School for more than three decades, and this article is his first to be made available online for small-group or individual Bible study. He plans to post several more articles from his many years of preparing Bible lessons. Professionally, John has co-authored several textbooks, including a textbook on indoor air quality engineering, a textbook about renewable energy, and a popular fluid mechanics textbook that is now in its fourth edition, is used around the world, and has been translated into several languages. He has also written two Biblical historical fiction novels, *I Adam: The Man without a Navel* (<https://goo.gl/69NdED>) and *I Peter: My Life in Threes* (<https://goo.gl/ZcTjHy>). All of his books can be found at his Amazon Author Page at <https://goo.gl/khDWFJ>. John is a devoted Christian who yearns to please the Master, Jesus the Christ. His desire is that his books and Bible studies will prompt readers to think more deeply about the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior and will encourage many to read and study the Bible, for in it are the Words of Life.



If you have comments or questions about any of John Cimbala's books or Bible studies, especially if they have helped you to better understand Christianity and its profound implications and promises, please write to him at jmc6@psu.edu.

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