

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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John 20:1-13 -- The Empty Tomb

by Dan Trygg

“Now on the first day of the week...” (20:1) -- That is, on Sunday morning, the day after the Sabbath. ***“Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark...”*** -- From the other gospels, we find that she was accompanied by at least two other women, i.e., another Mary, as well as Salome and/or Joanna (depending on whether these are two names for the same person, or refer to separate individuals), and possibly others (Matt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:10). Some of the minor discrepancies regarding the time (for example concerning whether it was dark, or the sun had risen) are resolved by a closer look at the original language. For example, the word translated as “came” can also mean “went”, thus it could be that they *started* to the tomb while it was still dark, or as Luke expressed it, “deep dawn” (Lk. 24:1). Then, the sun could indeed have risen by the time they actually *arrived* at the tomb, as Mark reported (Mk. 16:1). ***“...and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.”*** -- From Mark’s account, we find that this was a matter of concern to the women, because it was a very large stone (Mk. 16:3,4). It was common practice to have a large disc-shaped stone, which would be rolled into a trough in front of the entrance to the tomb. To remove such a stone required rolling it back up out of the trough, which would not have been easy. Such stones would have fit snugly against the entrance of the tomb, to prevent access by animals, and to contain the offensive odors of decomposition (Jn. 11:39). Since this was designed to be a rich man’s tomb, an extra-large stone would have been used to deter desecration by grave robbers. John makes no mention of the women’s purpose in coming, but from Mark and Luke we discover that they had prepared spices to anoint the body. Apparently, they did not know of the extensive preparations of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, though they had sat opposite the tomb during this time (Matt. 27:61). They also appear to be ignorant of the steps the chief priests and Pharisees had taken to secure the tomb (Matt. 27:62-66). With the tomb having been sealed, and with a squad of guards posted, they undoubtedly would have been turned away. Their ignorance was due to the fact that they had stayed home during the Sabbath day, according to the Law. John makes no mention of how the stone was rolled away, just that they found it so when they arrived. From Matthew we are informed that an angel had rolled it away.

“And so she ran and came to Simon Peter...” (vs. 2) -- Again, John does not relate what is in the other gospel accounts. He mentions nothing of the angels who met them at the tomb, who told them to inform the disciples (Matt. 28:1-8; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-9). ***“...and the other disciple whom Jesus loved...”*** -- A reference to John, the author, who apparently was the closest of the twelve to Jesus. ***“...and said to them, ‘They have taken away the Lord... and we do not know where they have laid Him.’”*** -- From the other accounts, we know that the angels clearly proclaimed to the women that Jesus was risen from the dead. There is no indication that any of them had difficulty believing the angelic announcement. *Once again, John lets us in on a particular story not covered by the other gospel writers.* Here, he reports the story of Mary Magdalene’s slowness of heart to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. This not only adds human color to the account, but also actually strengthens the credibility of her testimony, because there can be no doubt that she was not at all predisposed to “wishful thinking” in this matter. Note what she tells the disciples: ***“They have taken away His body, and we don’t know where they laid Him.”*** Clearly, she is not thinking “resurrection”, at all.

“Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they were going to the tomb...” (vs. 3) -- In response to the report of the women, they ran to see for themselves what had happened.

“And the two were running together...” (vs. 4) -- That is, they started out together. ***“...and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first.”*** -- John, traditionally the younger of the two, was more fleet of foot, and outran Peter. The vividness of the details speaks strongly of a first person account.

“...and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there...” (vs. 5) -- From the entrance, John could see the grave clothes still lying on the shelf. Had there been a grave robbery, what possible purpose would there have been to steal a corpse and take the time to laboriously untie and unwrap the sticky spice-filled wrappings, only to carry away a naked, sticky cadaver? Another factor is that both the myrrh and aloes were very powerful aromatic spices (think of Vicks Vaporub, and you have a close approximation of the strength and volatility of this compound), which would have been not only easily detectable, but also difficult to wash off. Had anyone removed the grave clothes, they would certainly have smelled strongly of the pungent odor of myrrh and aloes. No. If someone were to steal the body, they certainly would have chosen a method which required the least amount of time at the tomb, and they would have wanted to have as little actual contact with the body and wrappings as possible. It would have required several men, and a stretcher or some other means of conveyance for transporting the body. ***“...but he did not go in.”*** --

Possibly a mixture of fear and respect for the dead kept him from going inside. His upbringing would also have played a part in his hesitancy, since to visit or touch a tomb would make a person unclean (Num. 19:16).

“Simon Peter therefore also came, ...and entered the tomb...” -- Peter was not going to let fear or defilement stand in the way of his devotion to Jesus. ***“...and he beheld the linen wrappings lying, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.”*** (vss. 6,7) -- The question is, ***“What did they see?”*** Were the linen wrappings removed from the body, lying in a pile on the floor, with the face cloth bundled up in another pile? Or, ***did they see grave clothes which were still lying where they had originally been, only there was no longer a body contained within their folds?*** The Greek language does not rule out either possibility, although the word describing the condition of the face cloth is more descriptive of an orderly arrangement than a pile of discarded cloth. The word, *entulissō*, means to “wrap in”, or “roll in”, describing the action of wrapping around the head. Here, in Jn. 20:7, the Greek says, “and the face cloth, which was-being upon His head, not lying with the grave clothes, rather separately being-having-been-wrapped into one position/place.” What was the purpose of this observation? Was it to say that there were two piles of cloth, as opposed to one jumbled mass of linen strips? Or, was it to describe the orderly arrangement of the grave clothes and face cloth, still laying where they had originally been, ...separated, not because they were cast aside into separate piles, but because they had been originally wrapped that way, indicating that the body had passed through the wrappings?

“Therefore the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also...” (vs. 8) -- John, emboldened by Peter’s entrance into the tomb, followed after him. ***“...and he saw and believed.”*** -- This is an indicator that ***what they saw was unusual and inexplicable enough to cause them to believe in the resurrection.*** The empty tomb, and the manner in which the grave clothes were lying was clear enough evidence to them that they concluded that Jesus must have risen from the dead.

“For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.” (vs. 9) -- In spite of the numerous times Jesus had told them He was going to rise again, ***it had been unfathomable to them. Now there was unquestionable evidence supporting the fact of His resurrection laying right in front of them.***

“So the disciples went away again to their own homes.” (vs. 10) -- ***Even now, though they had come to faith, it was still not quite real.*** Instead of rushing back with joy, they returned home, ***pondering what they had seen.*** There was an empty tomb, and vacated grave clothes, but they had not yet been confronted with a risen Christ.

Mary’s despair. – “But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping...” (vs. 11) -- Apparently, Mary either had not yet entered the tomb, or could not process what was to be seen there. Certainly, she still was not of a mind to believe that Jesus had risen. Probably she had herself only returned from telling the disciples, who had run ahead of her to the tomb. It would also seem that either the disciples did not speak to her concerning their thoughts, or possibly she had missed them when they departed. ***“...and, so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb.”*** -- This is the second time that John mentioned the necessity of stooping in order to peer inside (cf. vs. 5). This tells us that the doorway was not the height of a full-grown female. The entrance was probably only about four feet high, maybe less. ***“...and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.”*** (vs. 12) -- All four gospel accounts mention an angelic visitation to the women, though the details vary. In the other accounts, the angels clearly proclaim Jesus’ resurrection, and send the women to tell the other disciples (Matt. 28:1-7; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-12). John, writing later, assumes that the reader was familiar with these accounts. The information he records is meant to be supplementary, and appears to have occurred *after* these other accounts. If the other women were there, or nearby, John makes no reference to them. The focus is on Mary. ***“And they said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’”*** (vs. 13) -- This question makes no sense unless we see that Mary already had been told of Jesus’ resurrection. She should have been joyful and excited. Evidently, she had not clearly perceived what the angels had declared to her and the other women before they ran to get the disciples. Mary was overcome with grief and confusion. ***“She said to them, ‘Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.’”*** The tomb was clearly empty, the body was gone, and, ***in spite of all she had been told, poor Mary could not believe the unbelievable.*** The Good News had fallen on a heart too broken and despairing to hear and grasp what was being said. All she knew was grief.

The empty tomb was an essential part of the evidence for the gospel message. If the tomb was not empty, ...if the body was still there, then there had been no resurrection. By definition, in the Jewish mind of that time, resurrection meant the return to life of a dead body. All the poetic and philosophical ramblings of our modern times, about resurrection being “the rise of faith of the disciples”, would have been dismissed as nonsense in the first century. **For someone to “rise from the dead” meant that they came back to life.** The first, and primary bit of physical evidence to support that claim ***had to be an empty tomb.*** The further evidence of ***the undisturbed, but empty, grave clothes,*** would provide a second, very powerful, physical sign that something miraculous had happened.