

Week 2 Biblical Narratives: A Comparison of the Resurrection Traditions

Read through the **Resurrection Accounts** in Matthew 28, Mark 16:1-8 (the earliest manuscripts end with v. 8)¹, Luke 24, and John 20-21². Refer to each passage individually when answering the questions. The death of Jesus was not the end of his life or work. His resurrection is an entirely new possibility for humanity, and it is the cornerstone of our Christian faith. Paul said it so well in 1 Cor. 15:17-19:

If Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, and what's more, those who have died in Christ are gone forever. If we have hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else. (CEB)

The resurrection is an important section of Jesus' story to investigate and gives us an important window into the way the New Testament approached their retelling of the Christ event and its significance for their hearer-readers.

There are *two basic categories of Easter talk* in the New Testament: **narrative** and **confession**. 1 Cor. 15:3-5, for example, **confesses** that "*Christ died for our sins . . . (and) was raised up on the 3rd day according to the Scriptures*"; and then **declares**: "*he appeared to Peter and then to the 12*" and goes on to list further **appearances** to "*more than 500 people at one time.*" So, **confession** is a **solemn declaration of belief** in the act of God that raised up the Crucified Jesus to a new state of life after his execution. **Narrative**, on the other hand, **describes how that object of belief came into being and acceptance**. The Gospel narratives communicate the personal experience and witnesses of the narrators and/or their sources. It involves personal experience.

A. Read through Mt. 28, Mk. 16:1-8, Lk. 24, and Jn. 20-21 several times. Make 4 columns and answer the questions below. You may need to set the paper layout to landscape, or you may organize this section in any way that is helpful for future use.

B. Making initial observations.

1. **How many different encounters** with the resurrected Jesus does each gospel present? Include the verse numbers relating to each encounter.
2. **Which characters are mentioned or named?**
3. **What exactly does each character see or experience?**
4. **At what point in the story, if at all, does the character recognize Jesus? Who initiates the encounter? Does the encounter make a theological point?**
5. **What do the characters say about the resurrection and to whom do they say it?**
6. **Is there anything in the story to indicate that the character[s] understood the importance of the encounter? Are the characters confessing or simply reporting the incident?**

¹ The issue of Mark's ending will be dealt with in your readings and lesson. It turns on the issue of textual criticism, a technical and in-depth comparison, and an analysis of the manuscript evidence. Textual criticism is also dealt with in Biblical Exegesis. However, if you would like a **1-minute explanation of this issue** by one of the most informed textual critics of our modern times, Bruce Wallace, be sure to watch this insightful explanation on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2bgfV5qzE8>

² John's Gospel is the last gospel written. While he is using unique, eye-witness traditions, scholars are increasingly aware and impressed with his knowledge of the Synoptic traditions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

C. Comparisons:

1. What **similarities** did you notice among the accounts?
2. What **differences** exist among the accounts?
3. If someone were to ask you to explain the significance of the similarities or differences, what would you say?

D. A Word about Apocryphal Gospels: There is a movement online to discredit the canonical gospels by pointing out the existence of other writings that never made it into the canon. The suggestion is that the Church conspired to demean non-conformist voices when it was in a position of power to decide these matters. Let's tackle this issue with the Gospel of Peter. First, the process of canonization involved churches recognizing the benefit and impact of an NT writing's message on the spiritual well-being and growth of its congregations. Second, faithfulness to the apostolic tradition was an important criterion used for inclusion but identifying a document with an apostle is not the same as faithfulness to that apostle's teaching. There are other criteria, but these will suffice for now. As you read the resurrection account from the Gospel of Peter, you will notice some interesting deviations (which appear to be an **apocalyptic re-imagining**) and some common elements (which show how powerful the **collective memory** of the resurrection was within the early church).

Read through this excerpt from the Gospel of Peter and answer the questions below:

[28] But the scribes and Pharisees and elders, having gathered together with one another, having heard that all the people were murmuring and beating their breasts, saying that 'If at his death these very great signs happened, behold how just he was,' [29] feared (especially the elders) and came before Pilate, begging him and saying, [30] 'Give over soldiers to us in order that we may safeguard his burial place for three days, lest, having come, his disciples steal him, and the people accept that he is risen from the death, and they do us wrong.'

[31] But Pilate gave over to them Petronius the centurion with soldiers to safeguard the sepulcher. And with these, the elders and scribes came to the burial place.

[32] And having rolled a large stone, all who were there, together with the centurion and the soldiers, placed it against the door of the burial place.

[33] And they marked it with 7 wax seals; and having pitched a tent there, they safeguarded it.

[34] But early when the Sabbath was dawning, a crowd came from Jerusalem and the surrounding area in order that they might see the sealed tomb.

[35] But in the night in which the Lord's Day dawned, when the soldiers were safeguarding it 2 by 2 in every watch, there was a loud voice in heaven; [36] and **they saw** that the heavens were opened and that 2 males who had much radiance had come down from there and come near the sepulcher.

[37] But that stone which had been thrust against the door, having rolled by itself, went a distance off the side; and the sepulcher opened, and both the young men entered.

[38] And so those soldiers, **having seen** [39] And while they were relating what they had seen, again **they see** 3 males who have come out from the sepulcher, with the 2 supporting the other one, and a cross following them, [40] and the head of the 2 reaching unto heaven, but that of the one being led out by a hand by them going beyond the heavens.

[41] And **they were hearing** a voice from the heavens saying, 'Have you made proclamation to the fallen-asleep?' [42] And an obeisance was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'

[43] And so those people were seeking a common perspective to go off and make these things clear to Pilate; [44] and while they were still considering it through, there appear again the opened heavens and a certain man having come down and entered into the burial place.

[45] **Having seen these things**, those around the centurion hastened at night before Pilate (having left the sepulcher which they were safeguarding) and described all the things that they indeed had seen, agonizing greatly and saying: 'Truly he was God's Son.'

[46] In answer, Pilate said: 'I am clean of the blood of the Son of God, but it was to you that this seemed [the thing to do].'

[47] Then all, having come forward, were begging and exhorting him to command the centurion and the soldiers to say to no one what they had seen. [48] 'For,' they said, 'it is better for us to owe the debt of the greatest sin in the sight of God than to fall into the hands of the Jewish people and be stoned.' [49] And so Pilate ordered the centurion and the soldiers to say nothing.

[50] Now at the dawn of the Lord's Day Mary Magdalene, a female disciple of the Lord (who, afraid because of the Jews since they were inflamed with anger, had not done at the tomb of the Lord what women were accustomed to doing for the dead beloved by them), [51] having taken with her women friends, came to the tomb where he had been placed.

[52] And they were afraid lest the Jews should see them and were saying, 'If indeed on that day on which he was crucified we could not weep and beat ourselves, yet now at his tomb we may do these things.'

[53] But who will roll away for us even the stone placed against the door of the tomb in order that having entered, we may sit beside him and do the expected things?

[54] For the stone was large, and we were afraid lest anyone see us. And if we are unable, let us throw against the door what we bring in memory of him; let us weep and beat ourselves until we come to our homes.'

[55] And having gone off, they found the sepulcher opened. And having come forward, they bent down there and saw there a certain young man seated in the middle of the sepulcher, comely and clothed with a splendid robe, who said to them: [56] 'Why have you come? Whom do you seek? Not that one who was crucified? He is risen and gone away. But if you do not believe, bend down and see the place where he lay, because he is not here. For he is risen and gone away to there whence he was sent.'

[57] Then the women fled frightened.

[58] Now it was the final day of the Unleavened Bread, and many went out returning to their home since the feast was over.

[59] But we twelve disciples of the Lord were weeping and sorrowful; and each one, sorrowful because of what had come to pass, departed to his home.

[60] But I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew having taken our nets went off to the sea. And there was with us Levi of Alphaeus whom the Lord ... (*the rest is missing*).

1. **What differences did you notice?**
2. **What similarities did you notice?**
3. **Does it seem reasonable that the Church did not include this document in the canon? Why, or why not?**

E. Theological Perspective: There is an overall **theological tension** between **faith** and **sight**. How does each canonical gospel show this tension? How does the Gospel of Peter try to resolve this tension?