

Neighborly Apologetics

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Jesus and the Resurrection, Part 7

Jesus and the Resurrection, Part 7: The Charge of Contradictions

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [May 7, 2024](#))

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands at the absolute center of Christian faith and apologetics. Paul states the matter with unflinching clarity: if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain; if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Corinthians 15). History itself is divided by this event. That is why the accusations that the resurrection accounts are riddled with contradictions matter so deeply. If the details cannot be trusted, the larger claim collapses.

In this session of the Neighborly Apologetics series, Del Tackett returns to the resurrection after a brief pause to address cultural threats. The series is not primarily academic apologetics, though academic work supplies the answers believers need. It is neighborly: ordinary Christians, filled with the Spirit and equipped with the Word, building trusted relationships with those God has placed next door, interceding for them, and offering a reasoned defense when questions arise that their neighbors' worldviews cannot answer. The charge of contradictions is one such question. Tackett addresses it by examining four common accusations drawn from an online skeptic's list, then showing how the Gospel records fit together without contradiction when read carefully and with sound hermeneutical principles.

The first accusation concerns the timing of the women's visit to the tomb. Matthew says the women came as it began to dawn. Mark says they came very early when the sun had risen. Luke places them at early dawn. John records that Mary Magdalene came early while it was still dark. Critics treat these statements as mutually exclusive. Tackett begins by affirming the inerrancy of Scripture in the original manuscripts. The accounts are pieces of a single puzzle; apparent mismatches often require only an intervening piece to reveal their harmony.

He then examines the physical reality of dawn itself. Dawn is not a light switch. Light appears long before the sun's disk clears the horizon because of atmospheric refraction, the spectrum of light, and the gradual rotation of the earth. Astronomers divide the period into astronomical twilight (sun 18°–12° below the horizon), nautical twilight (12°–6°), and civil twilight (6° to the horizon). Technical sunrise occurs when the center of the sun's disk reaches the horizon. At Jerusalem's latitude of approximately 31.77° north, these phases can be calculated with precision. On that morning astronomical twilight ran roughly from 4:56 to 5:27 a.m., nautical from 5:27 to 5:56 a.m., and civil from 5:56 to 6:20 a.m., with sunrise at 6:20 a.m.

John's statement that Magdalene came while it was still dark most naturally describes her departure during astronomical or early nautical twilight—still dark by ordinary standards. Mark's

pairing of “very early” with “when the sun had risen” summarizes both the early leaving and the later arrival. By the time the women reached the tomb, the upper edge of the sun’s disk would already have appeared, placing the arrival within civil twilight, when one can legitimately say the sun had risen. Matthew’s and Luke’s more general phrases (“as it began to dawn,” “at early dawn”) simply locate the events within the twilight period and create no conflict. Geography reinforces the timeline. The lower city, where Magdalene and others may have lodged, lay nearly a mile from the tomb. Gathering companions, exchanging greetings, and walking the distance easily account for the interval between a dark departure and a sunrise arrival. Once departure and arrival are distinguished, the supposed contradiction disappears.

The second accusation concerns numbers—both of angels and of women. One account mentions a single angel, another two, and still another “young men.” Parallel questions arise about how many women came: John focuses on Magdalene alone, Matthew names two, Mark three, Luke at least five. Tackett introduces a critical hermeneutical principle he calls rule nine: historical narratives are always only a partial account. A historian, even under the inspiration of the Spirit, must be selective. The Gospels cover the entire life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in only a few pages. A partial record is not a false record. None of the writers claims to list every woman or every angel present. Matthew does not say “only two women came”; John does not say “Mary Magdalene was the only woman who came.” Each writer focuses on the participants relevant to his narrative purpose. The same principle applies to the angels. Mark is free to mention only the one who speaks. Luke and John may note two. Scripture itself often refers to angels as men (Acts 1:10–11 describes the two at the ascension as “two men in white clothing”). Every account that mentions these figures also describes white or dazzling garments, confirming the identification. Referring to angels as young men creates no contradiction.

The third accusation is more pointed. Matthew, Luke, and John record that the women reported what they had seen to the disciples, exactly as the angels instructed. Mark, however, states that the women fled from the tomb in trembling and astonishment and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. On the surface this is a direct conflict. Tackett proposes a historically plausible reconstruction that removes it. A substantial number of women—perhaps half a dozen to a dozen—intended to anoint the body. They were lodged in different parts of the city (lower city, upper city, possibly Bethany) and therefore set out in smaller groups, planning to meet at the tomb. Magdalene may have started earliest, been overtaken by the earthquake, and sprinted ahead while companions lagged. She arrives, finds the tomb empty, and runs to tell Peter and John. The remaining women of her party continue, are joined by others, enter the tomb, encounter the angels, and receive the command to tell the disciples. Some of the women, however—particularly those left alone and terrified—may have fled in fear and said nothing, precisely the detail Mark records. Meanwhile the larger group obeys and reports. Tackett also notes the textual question surrounding the longer ending of Mark; many scholars believe the original ending was lost, and the abrupt conclusion we possess may reflect only the fearful response of one subgroup. Multiple parties arriving and reacting at slightly different times supply the intervening piece that harmonizes the accounts.

The fourth and most difficult accusation concerns geography and the larger sequence of events. Matthew presents both the angels and the risen Jesus instructing the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where Jesus will meet them; the disciples appear to go, and Jesus delivers the Great Commission there. Mark records the same angelic instruction. Luke, however, appears to compress everything from resurrection to ascension into a single day in Jerusalem and has Jesus charge the

disciples not to leave the city until they are clothed with power from on high. John places appearances in Jerusalem on resurrection evening and again eight days later (with Thomas), then records a later appearance by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. The pieces seem irreconcilable until one turns to Luke's second volume. In Acts 1:3 Luke explicitly states that Jesus presented himself alive by many convincing proofs over a period of forty days. The Gospel of Luke has therefore telescoped events that actually spanned weeks; it never claims they all occurred on the same day. Telescoping is a normal historiographical technique.

With that recognition a coherent sequence emerges. Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem on the evening of the resurrection (without Thomas) and again eight days later (with Thomas). Only after the Feast of Unleavened Bread—itself treated like an extended Sabbath during which travel was restricted—do the disciples journey to Galilee. There Jesus meets them repeatedly over the remaining portion of the forty days, including the shore appearance and the appearance to more than five hundred. At some point Jesus directs them to return to Jerusalem; there he gives the final charge to remain until Pentecost and then leads them out to Bethany, from which he ascends. The disciples' delay in leaving Jerusalem is readily explained by the ongoing feast. All four Gospel accounts fit within this framework once partial reporting and telescoping are taken into account.

Throughout the presentation Tackett returns to the same underlying conviction: the Word of God is trustworthy. Apparent contradictions are invitations to look more carefully, to recover intervening pieces, and to recognize the legitimate freedom of inspired historians to select and arrange material according to their purposes. The early polemic over the empty tomb and the early creed preserved in 1 Corinthians 15 further demonstrate that the resurrection claim was not a legend that developed over generations; it was already being debated and confessed within years of the event itself.

The practical fruit of this study is confidence. Believers need not fear the charge of contradictions. When a neighbor raises one of these questions, the Christian can respond not with defensiveness but with careful, charitable explanation. The next session will attempt a full harmonization of all the resurrection events, times, and places, gathering the details treated here into a single coherent picture. Until then, the invitation remains the same: keep the royal law, build relationships with those God has placed next door, intercede for them, and be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you—beginning with the risen Christ whose empty tomb still divides history and whose Word still stands.

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Jesus and the Resurrection, Part 7

The Charge of Contradictions: Can We Trust the Resurrection Accounts?

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [May 7, 2024](#))

The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christian faith. Paul declares that if Christ has not been raised, our preaching and our faith are in vain, and we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15). Yet critics often claim the Gospel accounts are full of contradictions about times, numbers, places, and events. Del Tackett addresses four common charges and shows how careful reading removes the apparent conflicts.

First, the timing of the women's visit. John says Mary Magdalene came while it was still dark; Mark says they arrived when the sun had risen. Dawn is gradual, not instantaneous. Light appears long before the sun clears the horizon. Mary likely left during early twilight while it was still dark and arrived after the sun's disk had risen. The accounts describe different moments of the same journey.

Second, the number of angels and women. One Gospel mentions one angel, another two, and some call them "young men." The same pattern appears with the women. Historical narratives are always selective; a partial record is not a false one. Writers focus on the figures relevant to their purpose. Scripture itself often refers to angels as men in white clothing.

Third, whether the women told the disciples. Three Gospels say they reported the news; Mark says they said nothing because they were afraid. Multiple groups of women likely arrived at different times. Some obeyed the angels and told the disciples; others fled in fear. Both responses can be true.

Fourth, Galilee versus Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark record instructions to go to Galilee. Luke seems to keep everything in Jerusalem. Luke's Gospel telescopes events that Acts 1:3 clarifies lasted forty days. The disciples remained in Jerusalem during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, then traveled to Galilee, and later returned for the ascension.

These explanations rest on sound principles: partial accounts are not false, and inspired writers may arrange material for their purposes. The early creed and polemic already circulating within years of the event further confirm the resurrection was no late legend. Believers can meet the charge of contradictions with confidence and a calm, reasoned answer.

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