

## Responding to the atheists and skeptics—1- The Challenge and Earthquake Objection

### SUMMARY OF THE RESURRECTION EVENTS

- Event #1: Saturday, 5:45 p.m., April 4, 33: Two Marys go to “look” at tomb then return, Matt. 28:1.  
Event #2: Sunday, 3:00 a.m., April 5, 33: Earthquake and angel from heaven, Matt. 28:2-4.  
Event #3: Sunday, 4:00 a.m., April 5, 33: MM visits the tomb before daybreak, Jn. 20:1.  
Event #4: Sunday, 4:15 a.m.: MM reports empty tomb to John & Peter, Jn. 20:2.  
Event #5: Sunday, 4:30 a.m.: Peter and John run to the tomb, Jn. 20:3-9.  
Event #6: Sunday, 4:40 a.m.: MM returns to tomb & sees 2 angels, Jn. 20:10-13.  
Event #7: Sunday, 4:50 a.m.: MM sees the Risen Lord, Jn. 20:14-17.  
Event #8: Sunday, 5:00 a.m.: MM tells disciples who do not believe her, Jn. 20:18; Mk. 16:9-11.  
Event #9: Sunday, 6:00 a.m.: MM & other women go to tomb of Jesus, Mk. 16:1-3; Lk. 24:1-2.  
Event #10: Sunday, 6:30 a.m.: Women enter tomb; 3 angels, Mt. 28:5-7; Mk 16:4-7; Lk. 24:3-8.  
Event #11: Sunday, 7:00 a.m.: Women run in fear; Jesus meets them, Mt. 28:8-10; Mk. 16:8.  
Event #12: Sunday, 8:00 a.m.: Women went to tell disciples; soldiers report, Mat 28:11-15.  
Event #13: Sunday, 8:10 a.m.: Once again, the disciples do not believe the women, Lk. 24:9-11  
Event #14: Sunday, 8:30 a.m.: However, Peter runs to the tomb a second time, Lk. 24:12.  
Event #15: Sunday, 8:45 a.m.: Private meeting between Jesus and Peter, 1 Cor. 15:5; Lk. 24:34.  
Event #16: Sunday, 10 a.m.-2:00 p.m. Jesus & 2 travelers to Emmaus, Mk. 16:12; Lk. 24:13-32.  
Event #17: Sunday, 5:00 p.m. The 2 travelers tell the 11 Disciples, Mk. 16:13; Lk. 24:33-35.  
Event #18: Sunday, 5:20 p.m. Thomas leaves; Jesus appears, Lk. 24:36-49; Jn. 20:19-25.  
Event #19: 8 days after the resurrection. Jesus appears to Thomas, Mk. 16:14-18; Jn 20:26-31.  
Event #20: 2 weeks after the resurrection. Jesus appears to disciples on shore of Galilean Sea, Jn 21:1-25.  
Event #21: 3 weeks after the resurrection. Jesus appears to eleven disciples on mountain, Matt. 28:16-20.  
Event #22: 40 days after the resurrection. Jesus’s last group appearance, and His ascension into Heaven, Mk 16:19-20; Lk. 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-12.  
Event #23: 3-6 years after the resurrection. Jesus appears to Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9:3-9.

I would like to conclude this series by answering the various attacks on the resurrection narratives by the atheists and skeptics. A good representation of the attacks on the resurrection accounts of Jesus Christ is found at Dan Barker's website, <http://www.ffrf.org/legacy/books/lfif/?t=stone>. Here is the challenge and the first objection followed my response:

## **Leave No Stone Unturned**

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### **An Easter Challenge For Christians**

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I HAVE AN EASTER challenge for Christians. My challenge is simply this: tell me what happened on Easter. I am not asking for proof. My straightforward request is merely that Christians tell me exactly what happened on the day that their most important doctrine was born.

Believers should eagerly take up this challenge, since without the resurrection, there is no Christianity. Paul wrote, "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not." (I Corinthians 15:14-15)

The conditions of the challenge are simple and reasonable. In each of the four Gospels, begin at Easter morning and read to the end of the book: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20-21. Also read Acts 1:3-12 and Paul's tiny version of the story in I Corinthians 15:3-8. These 165 verses can be read in a few moments. Then, without omitting a single detail from these separate accounts, write a simple, chronological narrative of the events between the resurrection and the ascension: what happened first, second, and so on; who said what, when; and where these things happened.

Since the gospels do not always give precise times of day, it is permissible to make educated guesses. The narrative does not have to pretend to present a perfect picture--it only needs to give at least one plausible account of all of the facts. Additional explanation of the narrative may be set apart in parentheses. ***The important condition to the challenge, however, is that not one single biblical detail be omitted.*** Fair enough?

I have tried this challenge myself. I failed. An Assembly of God minister whom I was debating a couple of years ago on a Florida radio show loudly proclaimed over the air that he would send me the narrative in a few days. I am still waiting. After my debate at the University of Wisconsin, "Jesus of Nazareth: Messiah or Myth," a Lutheran graduate student told me he accepted the challenge and would be contacting me in about a week. I have never heard from him. Both of these people, and others, agreed that the request was reasonable and crucial. Maybe they are slow readers.

Many bible stories are given only once or twice, and are therefore hard to confirm. The author of Matthew, for example, was the only one to mention that at the crucifixion dead people emerged from the graves of Jerusalem, walking around showing themselves to everyone--an amazing event that could hardly escape the notice of the other Gospel writers, or any other historians of the period. But though the silence of others might weaken the likelihood of a story, it does not disprove it. Disconfirmation comes with contradictions.

Thomas Paine tackled this matter two hundred years ago in *The Age of Reason*, stumbling across dozens of New Testament discrepancies:

"I lay it down as a position which cannot be controverted," he wrote, "first, that the agreement of all the parts of a story does not prove that story to be true, because the parts may agree and the whole may be false; secondly, that the *disagreement* of the parts of a story proves *the whole cannot be true.*"

Since Easter is told by five different writers, it gives one of the best chances to confirm or disconfirm the account. Christians should welcome the opportunity.

One of the first problems I found is in Matthew 28:2, after two women arrived at the tomb: "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it." (Let's ignore the fact that no other writer mentioned this "great earthquake.") This story says that the stone was rolled away after the women arrived, in their presence.

Yet Mark's Gospel says it happened *before* the women arrived: "And they said among themselves, Who shall roll away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great."

Luke writes: "And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre." John agrees. No earthquake, no rolling stone. It is a three-to-one vote: Matthew loses. (Or else the other three are wrong.) The event cannot have happened both before and after they arrived.

Some bible defenders assert that Matthew 28:2 was intended to be understood in the past perfect, showing what had happened before the women arrived. But the entire passage is in the aorist (past) tense, and it reads, in context, like a simple chronological account. Matthew 28:2 begins, "And, behold," not "For, behold." If this verse can be so easily shuffled around, then what is to **keep us from putting the flood before the ark, or the crucifixion before the nativity?**

## My Response

First, the synchronization I have presented meets the requirements of the challenge: I have not left out any verses, and I have provided a chronology based on educated guesses.

Second, his first challenge is regarding the earthquake. His contention is that the women in Matthew 28:1 visited the tomb before the earthquake whereas the women in the other gospel accounts visited the tomb after the earthquake. Through careful, scholarly, and documented exegesis I have shown that the women in Matthew 28:1 went Saturday evening for a quick look at the tomb (see event #1 above; for the exegesis of Matthew 28:1 see

<http://www.fbcweb.org/Doctrines/Resurrection-event-1a.pdf> ,

<http://www.fbcweb.org/Doctrines/Resurrection-event-1b.pdf> ,

<http://www.fbcweb.org/Doctrines/Resurrection-event-2.pdf>.

In sum, this first event includes two grieving Marys, late on the Sabbath (Saturday), just before sundown, coming to look upon the tomb where Jesus was buried. They looked upon it and returned home. Unlike the accounts of the sunrise Sunday morning trip of the women in Mark 16:1-2 and Luke 24:1-3, Matthew 28:1 makes no mention of their intention of spicing the body of Jesus. The event in Matthew 28:1 has nothing to do with the events in Mark and Luke.

I am surprised someone like Dan Barker who is a *member* of the Prometheus Society, a very exclusive very high-IQ club with less than one hundred *members*, is so confused here. All it takes is careful exegesis of Matthew 28:1 to clearly demonstrate that it is not to be confused with the other events. Maybe he is just a slow exegete ;-) – or maybe the “problem” has more to do with Romans 1:18-22. In any case, it is irrational to reject resurrection narratives based on a faulty view of Matthew 28:1. In the following DDRs I will respond to his other objections and see what happens.

In Him,

*Pastor Don*