

What happened on the first Easter Sunday?

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Opinion: the stories of what happened at Easter come from oral tradition and eye-witness testimony provided by early Christian sources and outlined in the four Gospels

A foundational idea in early Christianity was the notion that Jesus of Nazareth was alive, despite his execution on a cross at the hands of the Roman army. The man who was executed as "King of the Jews" – a detail found in each of the four Gospels – was actually a king and ruling his people in heaven.

How can someone have been executed and yet still alive? Resurrection was the answer that satisfied Jesus' early followers, an idea that finds some precedence in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, for example, in Daniel 12:2. Although there were ancient rumours that his earliest followers had stolen his body (Matt 27:62-66; 28:11-15), early Christian sources are unambiguous in their affirmation that God raised Jesus from the dead and that Jesus' resurrection foreshadowed their own future hopes. Just as God raised Jesus, so too will he raise his people on the coming Day of the Lord.

The earliest Christian writing - Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians which was written probably in the early 50s - addresses questions raised by this community about the fate of the dead. Paul's unshaken belief in resurrection is central to his answer: "for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died" (1 Thess 4:14). Likewise, drawing a contrast between the great King David and Jesus, Peter builds his argument that Jesus is king and messiah because after his crucifixion "this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Acts 2:32). This idea pervades all of the New Testament.

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But the actual Easter event, the day of Jesus' resurrection, is described only tersely in the New Testament, even though it appears in every one of the four Gospels. Much more space is given over to things that Jesus did in the forty days after his resurrection (Acts

1:3) than the resurrection itself. He appears to some of his disciples (Luke 24:36-49 and parallels), commissions them (Matt 28:16-20 and parallels) and gets combative on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). He confronts Thomas (John 20:24-29), eats fish for breakfast, converses with Peter (both John 21:1-23) and ascends to heaven (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-8). The story of the women who first experience the empty tomb is minimal in comparison and differs in each of the Gospels.

Early Christians remembered this story in a rich constellation of varying detail. In Mark, the earliest Gospel written around 70 CE about forty years or so after Jesus' execution, three women approach the tomb on Sunday morning: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome approach to anoint Jesus' body with spices. They wonder who will roll the stone in front of the tomb for them, but they see that it is already dislodged when they arrive. Wandering into the tomb, they find a young man dressed in a white robe who tells them not to be alarmed, Jesus who was crucified "has been raised; he is not here...go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee." In response, the women flee in terror, saying nothing to anyone.

Mark's Easter story was perceived to be problematic in early Christianity: Jesus does not appear, the man and the rolling away of the stone are not explained and the women don't heed his message. These issues are remedied in different ways both by later readers of Mark who add at least three different endings to the Gospel (16:8b-20 in modern Bibles, another ending in a single manuscript that is rarely printed) and by the other Gospel writers who use Mark's narrative as the basis for their own stories. Borrowing from and altering Mark's story, Matthew places Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" at the tomb. These two women experience an earthquake and an "angel of the Lord" descends from heaven, rolls the stone back and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning, and the cosmic disturbances make the guards, who only appear in Matthew's account, swoon as if dead. The message of the angel is similar to the young man in the white robe in Mark: "do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified...go quickly and tell the disciples, 'he has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee'" (28:6-7). In response, the women run to the disciples in both fear and joy. On the way, Jesus appears to them speaks a single word: "greetings." They grab hold of his feet and worship him (28:9). In Matthew, Jesus actually goes on to meet the disciples in

Galilee and delivers the famous Great Commission with which the Gospel ends (28:16-20). The problems with Mark are resolved in Matthew: the rolling of the stone is explained, Jesus actually appears and the women who first meet him heed the angel's message. But Luke's story of the women at the tomb differs still. The women are named as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and "other women with them." After preparing spices, they travel to the tomb to find the stone rolled away and an empty burial chamber. Two men in dazzling clothes then appear to them and remind them that Jesus himself had said that he would rise again and go to Galilee. The women then tell the 11 remaining disciples who are incredulous. Peter even sprints to the tomb to see what these women are on about. Jesus then appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and the women appear no more.

The story in the Gospel of John is different still. Mary Magdalene alone reports to Peter and another disciple that the tomb is empty. The disciples then race to the tomb and find it empty. In dismay, Mary weeps until she encounters two angels and Jesus himself, and they carry on an extended and intimate conversation.

What are we to make of the difference in the Easter stories of the New Testament? It is important to note at the outset is that they all share obvious similarities: Mary Magdalene was there, the stone was rolled away, and angelic figures were present, signifying divine action. But the details strongly diverge, the prominent role of the women is sometimes undermined by the dismissive actions of Peter and Jesus sometimes appears.

How can such a central moment in early Christian history change from Gospel to Gospel? The answer, I think, is memory. The Gospels are written, at the very earliest, about 40 years after this event and many accounts are revised up to two generations after Jesus' execution. Although they rely on oral tradition and eye-witness testimony, memory is an inherent and important part of the presentation of the first Easter Sunday.

Early Christians interpreted their traditions about Easter through their experiences as a community. For example, the growing specificity of the story from Mark to Matthew reflects Matthew's attempt to address circulating rumours that Jesus' body had been stolen by his disciples. In John, Mary Magdalene too thinks that Jesus' body had been taken. Changes in detail assuage particular concerns.

But these stories also differ because the most important memories to a community are the ones that are the most interpreted. Stories often require updating to remain relevant to a given community. In the modern world, we view sacred traditions as unchanging and fixed. However, change, memory and concerns for relevance are key components in antiquity to all important traditions. Despite these changes, the Gospels are univocal on two counts at least: firstly, Jesus, who was executed, was not in the tomb on Easter morning because he was in fact alive and secondly, a group of his female disciples were the first to break the news.

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