

John 20:1-18, The New Beginning¹

Overview

Our first task in approaching a passage of Scripture is to understand its structure: how it relates to the material around it, and how it is organized internally.

From chapter 18 on, John is organized into scenes—sections of narrative distinguished by change in characters, place, or time. As a scene, Table 1 (chart) shows how 20:1-18 is set off from the scenes on either side. All three occur at different times. The last two share some characters, but none with the first scene; there is some overlap in place between the first two, but the third occurs elsewhere.

	19:38-42	20:1-18	20:19-25
Characters	Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate, Nicodemus	Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Angels, Lord Jesus	Disciples, Lord Jesus
Place	Palace, Calvary, Tomb	Tomb	Upper Room
Time	Friday night	Sunday Morning	Sunday Evening

Table 1: The External Context of 20:1-18

Internally, the characters form a chiasm with an odd number of elements (Table 2). Such a structure puts the focus on the central element, in this case Peter and what he saw in vv. 6-7.

There is another structural mark of focus as well, the law of proportion, which says that a writer spends more space on things that are more salient. Here, vv. 11-18 occupy much more space than the structure of the chiasm would lead us to expect, and deserve special attention.


Mary	1 Finds tomb empty		11-18 Meets the Angels & the Lord
Peter & John	2-4 Run to the tomb		19 Return home
John	4-5 Views from outside		8-9 Enters tomb, believes
Peter	6-7 Enters tomb, views the cloths		

Table 2: Chiastic Structure of 20:1-18

1-2, Mary

In both of Mary's panels, she sees something, and then tells the others. In doing so, she is an example of the witness that the disciples are to bear.

1, She sees the open tomb

1 The first day of the week.—The disciples have been away from the tomb since sundown Friday. For a full day and two nights, only the Roman guard (Matt 27:65, unmentioned by John) has been there. The anointing Friday was hasty, as the previous verse emphasizes, because of the oncoming Sabbath.

All four gospels record that the resurrection took place on the first day of the week (chart):

Mat 28:1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward **the first day of the week**, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.

¹ This study draws from that on John 20 delivered in 2008.

Mar 16:2 And very early in the morning **the first day of the week**, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.

Luk 24:1 Now upon **the first day of the week**, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them.

This timing was apparently responsible for the Christian custom of setting apart the first day of the week for meeting together (Acts 20:7) and spiritual exercises (1 Cor 16:2):

Act 20:7 And upon **the first day of the week**, when the disciples came together to break bread, ...

1Co 16:2 Upon **the first day of the week** let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

It ultimately led to designating this day as “the Lord’s day”:

Rev 1:10 I was in the Spirit **on the Lord's day**, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,

The early church celebrated the Lord’s resurrection, not once a year around Passover, but every week, and so should we, as we remember our Lord.

cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre,—We sense her eagerness to tend to the Lord. The other gospels show that she is not alone, but John focuses on her.

and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.—

Limestone, the most common stone around Jerusalem, weighs about 160 pounds per cubic foot. We saw several rolling stones at ancient tombs in the area, and they are about a foot thick and about 4 feet in diameter (Figure 1, Figure 2, chart). Such a wheel of limestone would weigh almost exactly 2000 pounds, a full ton. Moving such an object would require at least several men, and probably mechanical aids as well. So she is surprised to find that it has been rolled away. She looked no further, but could only conclude that the grave had been violated.

2, She tells Peter and John

2 Then she runneth,—She didn't run on her way to the tomb, but now, in spite of the darkness, she takes off at full speed.

and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved,—Why were these two together? On Friday they followed the Lord to the house of the High Priest, but after Peter denied the Lord, he went out (Matt 26:75; Luke 22:62). We next see John with the women, and without Peter, at the cross (19:26). After the Lord's death, he and



Figure 1: Herod family tomb, Jerusalem. Van and Anita Parunak, April 1975

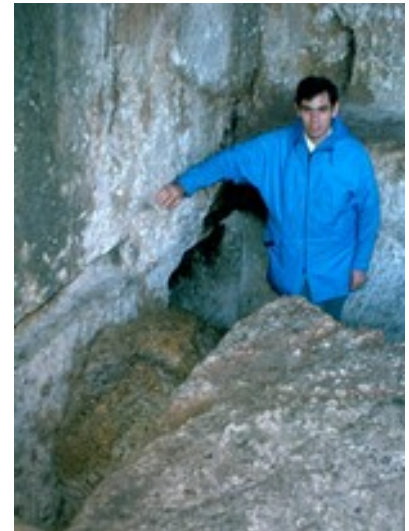


Figure 2: Tomb of Queen Helena of Adiabene, Jerusalem. Van and Anita Parunak, February 1975

Peter must have found one another. I'd like to think that John sought Peter out to comfort and encourage him, anticipating the standard of Heb 12:12. Later, in ch. 21, the Lord will restore Peter, but for Peter even to be comfortable associating with the disciples again, someone must have brought him back to the group.

and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre,—The only explanation they can formulate is that the body has been stolen.

and we know not.—The plural pronoun shows knowledge of the synoptic record that several women, not Mary alone, came to the tomb. But John focuses on Mary to define the chiastic structure.

where they have laid him.—In her mind he is still dead. The body may be somewhere else rather than here, but it is still a dead body.

3-4a, Peter and John

3 Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. 4 So they ran both together:—They are as anxious as was Mary.

4b-5, John

and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.—They didn't stay together. John arrives first, perhaps being the younger.

5 And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.—The “clothes” are most likely strips of linen in which the body was wrapped.

6-7, Peter

6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre,—To the least faithful disciple goes the honor of first inspecting the evidence of the resurrection, and reporting the state of the grave clothes.

and seeth the linen clothes lie,—Which John had also seen, looking through the door.

7 And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.—This is new and important. In addition to the body wrapping, there had been a separate piece of cloth around his head. Someone who came to steal the body would be very unlikely to unwrap it first. Even if they did, they would not take time to fold up the napkin.

Luke tells us Peter's state of mind upon seeing this evidence (chart):

Luk 24:12 Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass.

At this point, Peter knows that his denial of the Lord did not mean the end of the story. In spite of his faithlessness, God is doing something. In a short time, he will learn just what is going on. Luke goes on to write of the two who went to Emmaus,

Luk 24:33 And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven

gathered together, and them that were with them, 34 Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.

Paul also records this private meeting:

1Co 15:3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: 5 And that **he was seen of Cephas**, then of the twelve:

Note how patiently and tenderly the Lord restores his fallen disciple. First he sends John to comfort him. Then he shows him indirectly the evidence of his resurrection, before appearing privately to him.

8, John

8 Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre,—That is, John. and he saw, and believed.—What did he see, and what did he believe?

What he saw was no doubt the empty winding sheets and the folded napkin. The absence of the body (grave clothes and all) might be consistent with a grave robbery. Or one might find the unwrapped body after a thief had searched for valuables wrapped up with it. But no thief would take time to unwrap the body and then remove it, leaving the graveclothes behind. John (and Peter as well, for that matter) had seen Lazarus raised, with the bandages and napkin still in place (11:44). He would need them again. But the Lord has deliberately set them aside.

9 For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.—Compare 12:16, which relates that they did not connect the Lord's riding on an ass with the prophecy of Zech 9:9, or Luke 24:25, 45, the failure of the two on the road to Emmaus to understand the prophecies.

They would have heard many times, in the synagogue as well as from the Lord's lips, the scriptures that foretell the resurrection of the Messiah: Psa 16:10 (cf. Acts 2:25-31); Isa 53:10-12; Isa 55:3 (cf. Acts 13:34), and others. They had heard the Lord teach that Jonah's deliverance anticipated his resurrection:

Matt 12:40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

But they did not understand these words.

Belief here precedes understanding. Faith and experience develop iteratively. For example, in this case, John sees (knowledge of facts), then believes, then subsequently comes to know the scriptures.

John 10:38 implies four successive steps:

though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.

First they would see the works, then believe them, then know unity of the Lord and the Father, and finally come to believe in that unity. This may lie behind Paul's notion of progressing "from faith to faith," Rom 1:17.

Our understanding of scripture is intended to grow step by step with our walk of faith. If faith runs too far without being constrained by scripture, it becomes presumption; but if knowledge of scripture goes

too far without being exercised in life, it becomes dead. Understanding this dynamic helps us understand why seminaries and Bible schools can be so damaging to faith.

10, Peter and John

10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.—The last phrase is πρὸς ἑαυτοῦς, not the usual εἰς τὰ ἴδια (19:27; 1:11). The phrase is overwhelmingly used with verbs of speaking, to describe people talking among themselves.² Here, it probably means “went away talking among themselves.” Like the two on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:14, they are musing together over the events. John has come to some level of belief, Peter apparently not.

Contrast their inwardly-focused conversation with Mary's sharing of the news in vv. 2, 18.

11-18, Mary

We now return to the last element of the chiasm, but instead of closing off, John devotes nearly half of the entire structure to Mary's encounter with the Lord. By the law of proportion, this makes this highly focal; by the deviation from symmetry, it takes us by surprise, just as the Lord's appearance did Mary.

This section has multiple points of similarity with 1:35-42 (chart):

1:35-42	20:11-18
35 Again the next day after John stood , and two of his disciples;	11 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping:
36 And looking upon Jesus as he walked,	and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre,
he saith , Behold the Lamb of God! 37 And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.	12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, ... 13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.
38 Then Jesus turned , and saw them following,	14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.
and saith unto them, What seek ye?	15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.
They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou?	16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.
39 He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt , and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour.	17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and <i>to my God, and your God.</i>
40 One of the two which heard John <i>speak</i> , and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him,	18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples
We have found the Messiah, ...	that she had seen the Lord , and <i>that</i> he had spoken these things unto her. 25 We have seen the Lord

2 Sometimes it means movement towards a group of people (Gen 19:10; Ex 28:43), but never of movement of people together to some location away from where they are.

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The parallels continue at a coarser level, and without clear ordering, but with a parallel between Nathanael and Thomas:

ch. 1-2	ch. 20-21
1:42 prediction about Peter	21:18-19 prediction about Peter
1:45-51 strengthening doubting Nathanael	20:25-29 strengthening doubting Thomas
2:1-11 multiplication of wine	21:9 multiplication of fishes
2:11 sign leads to belief	20:30-31 signs lead to belief

John's intent is to show the resurrection as a new beginning. As ch. 1-2 opened the ministry of the Messiah on earth, ch. 20-21 open his resurrection ministry through his disciples. John has recorded what happened as an outgrowth of ch. 1-2; now he looks forward to what will happen as an outgrowth of 20-21. Two characteristics of this new beginning draw our attention, a similarity and a difference

Both times, we have a pattern of earlier disciples leading later ones to the Lord. The Baptist leads Andrew and John to the Lord, while the Lord finds Philip. Andrew brings Peter, and Philip brings Nathanael. In the new beginning, the Lord meets Mary, Mary tells the ten disciples, they tell Thomas. Once, someone brought each of us. We need to be exercised to tell others about the Lord.

There is also a difference. After the first beginning, the Lord is with the disciples constantly. After the new beginning, he comes and goes. No longer do they enjoy his constant physical presence. Instead, he appears and disappears, in a way that assures them that even when he is not visible, he knows where they are and what they are doing, and is ready to help them. He is training them to rely on his promise, "I am with you always" (Matt 28:20).

Notes

The Women at the Tomb

In the synoptics, three women (Mk 16:1) come to the tomb, and are met by an angel, who sends them back to the disciples with news that the Lord is risen. How then can Mary here return in such discouragement? She must have dashed back immediately, leaving the others, before they had entered the tomb and seen the angel. While she is gone, the others see the angels, then return to the disciples, but meanwhile Peter and John have set forth, missing the report of the resurrection. If the disciples are at John's house, in the SW quarter of the city, there would be many different routes to the two gates issuing onto Calvary, and the different groups passing back and forth might well have missed each other. See Wenham, *The Easter Enigma*, for maps and details.