

Comments on John 20

See the comments on John 11 regarding the clear rhetorical connections between chapters 11 and 20.

This chapter is where the disciples transition from not fully grasping who the person of Jesus is to fully understanding He is the Lord, the God of the Old Testament incarnate. Throughout the book the disciples and apostles saw Jesus as the Messiah, a new prophet-king, but failed to understand He was fully God in the flesh. Here, Mary Magdalene has the realization and makes the confession first (v. 18), and then Thomas fully expresses the comprehension last (v. 28). We would assume the other apostles present in v. 19-20 apprehend the same as well, but there is no documented confession.

John's telling of the events surrounding the tomb are somewhat different from the Synoptic Gospel accounts. Thomas Mumford in his Horizontal Harmony of the Four Gospels in Parallel Columns (published by Deseret in 1976) offers the following solution (with clarifying insertions by myself in brackets):

A casual reading of the events on the resurrection morning give the impression that John's account is quite different from that of the synoptic. In John, Mary Magdalene appears to visit the tomb alone and very early, and finding the stone rolled away she runs to tell Peter and John who run to see the tomb, and Mary returns with them. After Peter and John leave, the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary telling her to touch him not. Mary then runs to tell the Apostles.

In the synoptic, many women including Mary Magdalene go to the tomb early in the morning. Finding the stone rolled away, they look inside. Angels tell them Christ is risen, the women run to tell the Apostles; the resurrected Jesus meets them on their way, and they hold him by the feet and worship him.

Three problems are raised by these two apparently different accounts.

1. Did Mary go to the tomb alone first, or was her visit with the other women?
2. If Mary went to the tomb alone and found it empty (John 20:1) she would not be returning with the other women to anoint Jesus' body with spices like the synoptics say she was.
3. If Mary's first visit to the tomb was with the other women, and Jesus appeared to the other women on their

way to tell the Apostles (Matt. 28:9, 10), then the appearance to Mary alone at the tomb (John 20:1) would not be the first appearance of Jesus like Mark says (Mark 16:9).

I believe these two accounts can be harmonized very smoothly in the following manner: Mary Magdalene's first visit to the tomb (John 20:1) is with the other women and is the same visit recorded by the synoptics (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1). If Mary had already been there alone and knew of the resurrection she would not be returning with spices to anoint the body and wondering "who shall roll away the stone." Upon seeing the stone rolled away, Mary [Magdalene] immediately left the other women and ran to tell Peter and John (John 20:2). Because she did not stay long enough to see or hear the angels, she believes the body has been taken away. In further support of her visit to the tomb in the company of the other women, notice how she says to Peter in John 20:2, "...and WE know not where they have laid him." [In the absence of Mary Magdalene] the other women now enter the empty tomb and see the angels who tell them Christ is risen. These women now go to tell the Apostles. When Peter and John hear that angels are in the tomb and that Jesus is alive, they run to see the tomb. Notice that one of the synoptics (Luke 24:22) parallel John on this point after the return of all the women. Mary Magdalene follows Peter and John because she had not seen the angels or heard their message. Upon their arrival, Peter and John enter the tomb, find the linen clothes, but apparently no angels. Peter and John leave, but Mary [Magdalene] lingers at the tomb, still uncertain and wondering at what has happened. It is in this setting that the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary. She then goes and tells the disciples she has seen the Lord.

Matthew 28:9 is the account of Jesus' appearance to the other women. If Mark is correct that Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene, then this appearance to the other women must be after his appearance to Mary and not on the return from the tomb early that morning.

Mumford's presentation is robust, so I am not going to suggest anything more or different.

¹The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. ²Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the LORD out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.

³Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. ⁴So they ran both together: and the other disciple

did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. ⁵ And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. ⁶ Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, ⁷ And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. ⁸ Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. ⁹ For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.

v1-10 Mary Magdalene, in the company of other women, travel to Jesus' tomb before sunrise, and they see the stone has been removed from the opening of the tomb (v. 1). Mary leaves the other women and runs to tell Peter and John Beloved that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb and they don't know where it is (v. 2). Peter and John both leave to go to the tomb (v. 3), with John outrunning Peter (v. 4). John crouches down and looks into the tomb, seeing it empty with the abandoned grave clothes (v. 5), and Peter catches up and goes into the tomb, seeing close up the body is absent, but the clothing is present (v. 6), with the face covering neatly wrapped up on it's own (v. 7). John follows Peter into the tomb, and similarly witnesses that absence of Jesus' body (v. 8). They believe Mary's statement that the body of Jesus has gone missing, not yet understanding that Jesus has resurrected (v. 9). Peter and John then leave and return home (v. 10), leaving Mary Magdalene behind.

v1 John's account excludes the other women from the scene and focuses squarely on Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9 also explicitly identifies Mary Magdalene). Luke positively identifies three women and states there were others as well, cf. Luke 24:9-11. Matthew's and Mark's account says there were women present. However, John only interacted with Mary Magdalene, because she was the one who left the tomb and ran to tell Peter and himself. John apparently didn't interact with the other women in that moment, so he omits them from his account.

The IV/JST on this verse also appends "and two angels sitting thereon" thereby harmonizing it with the synoptic accounts which indicate angels were present.

"when it was yet dark", the Sabbath ended at the previous sundown, Saturday evening. They likely didn't want to perform the rituals in the dark that night, so they waited until early the next morning and leave early when it was still dark knowing the time to travel would have resulted in the sun rising while they walked. This was not a matter of keeping the sabbath, as the sabbath had ended. This was a practical matter of not being able to work in the dark. While there would have been a full moon at Passover, working in the

tomb would have been problematic.

"seeth the stone taken away", the previous Friday, they had attended to Jesus' entombment with Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus (cf. Luke 23:55), so they had seen the stone put into place. Seeing the stone moved is the first sign of something being amiss.

John's account wherein Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene prompted Brigham Young to speculate Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, cf. JofD 2:81. He also speculated Jesus was married to both Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus, as well using the rationale that their behavior towards him would have been inappropriate otherwise, cf. JofD 4:259. There is nothing scriptural requiring such conclusions, and Young makes no suggestion of personal revelation. Rather, it is Brigham's rationale based upon his sense of appropriate relations between man and woman that motivated him to draw conclusions.

It is true Jesus' interactions with these women would have been deemed inappropriate according to Pharisaic traditions, but it is clear Jesus paid no heed to their hedge about the Law of Moses (cp. 4:9).

Young would have also found it convenient to draw such a conclusion to justify the practice of polygamy in the Church at that time.

v2 "Simon Peter, and to the other disciple", given the context, it seems likely John Beloved was staying with Peter because he had given his own residence to Mary, mother of Jesus (cf. 19:26-27). John staying with Peter was probably an ad hoc arrangement for Passover, as there is nothing to suggest they had a permanent residence at Jerusalem. Peter's permanent residence would have been at Galilee. John includes this detail to explain why he was there, because he had bunked with Peter, and Mary Magdalene came for Peter, not for John. John just happened to be there.

"They have taken away the Lord", by "they" she might be implying the agents of the Sanhedrin, to defame or desecrate Jesus' body. Or, perhaps it is just an ambiguous pronoun she uses because she doesn't know who "they" are.

v5-7 The abandonment of the graveclothes symbolically indicate Jesus isn't dead. The graveclothes described are typical for that time. Lazarus wore similar linens, cp. 11:44. That the napkin was set aside and neatly folded shows deliberacy on the part of whoever removed them, indicating this wasn't a case of hasty grave robbery. Rather, it was the careful and reverent removal of a body that no longer had need of the graveclothes. We might assume the presence of the two angels was to remove the grave clothes from Jesus' body in

preparation for the resurrection and dressing in His new clothing, whatever that might be.

Contrast this with Lazarus' being raised from the dead in ch. 11, where he comes out of the tomb still bound up in his graveclothes, and Jesus says to have him unbound. Here, Jesus abandons them entirely, as He has no need for them any longer.

v9 Exactly what scripture this is referring to is unclear. Likely possibilities are Ps. 16:20, Hosea 6:2 and Jonah 1:17 via Matt. 12:38-52.

¹¹ But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, ¹² And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. 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.

¹⁴ And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. 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.

¹⁶ Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. 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 to my God, and your God.

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

v11-18 Mary is left alone at the tomb and she begins crying over the situation, again looking into the empty tomb (v. 11). However, this time she sees two men dressed in white sitting in the tomb, at the head and foot of where Jesus' body was (v. 12). They ask her why she is crying, and she answers honestly it is because someone has taken the body of Jesus and she doesn't know where it is (v. 13).

Without giving them a chance to respond to her, she turns away and see another person, not realizing it is the resurrected Jesus Himself (v. 14). Jesus asks her again why she is weeping and who she is looking for. She assumes He is the groundskeeper and asks Him if He has taken the body away, and if so, then to tell her where it is, so she can take custody of it (v. 15). Jesus calls her name, and she realizes it is Jesus, calling Him "my great teacher" (v. 16). Jesus responds to her, telling her she needs to let go of Him, that He cannot be detained at that moment, as He needs to go up to His Father. But, He tasks her with going and telling the Apostles that He is ascending to His Father, who is their Father as well (v. 17). Mary leaves Jesus and the tomb and goes and tells the Apostles that she has seen the resurrected Jesus and spoken with Him (v. 18).

v12 When the angels question Mary, the intent seems to be they are prompting her that there is no real reason for her to be mourning, as Jesus has risen from the dead. But, she is not grasping that at the moment, as she is overwhelmed by grief. She responds in a matter-of-fact way and then turns away from them because they are doing nothing to immediately console her grief.

With her eyes clouded by tears, perhaps her hands over her face in mourning, or wiping the tears from her face with her dress, it is safe to assume it was impossible for Mary to discern who it was she was talking with for entirely mundane reasons.

We would also assume Mary, Peter and John didn't talk about what they had seen in that moment. Peter and John simply left without speaking much with her, as she apparently wasn't aware that they didn't see anyone in the tomb as she has just seen.

If Mary had hoped Peter and John would do something about the situation of Jesus' missing body, it would have doubly upset her that they simply left, apparently doing nothing.

v17 "Touch me not", in the KJV, Jesus seems to prohibit Mary from touching him, yet in a relatively short while, apparently that same day, he permits the other women to touch him (cf. Matt. 28:9-10) and then later breaks bread with the two disciples (cf. Luke 24:30).

Other translations render the phrase differently, as "Do not cling to me" or "Do not hold me", possibly in the sense of His taking time to comfort her is preventing Him from ascending to the Father. Perhaps He is simply saying He needs to leave, because He has other things He needs to attend to.

Given the absence of Jesus' body from the tomb and His appearance to her at this point, it is safe to conclude this is not simply His spirit, but Jesus with His resurrected body. It isn't a physical impossibility that Mary could touch Him, as if He were only a spirit. Jesus hasn't ascended yet, it isn't that He hasn't resurrected yet.

What is happening here is established by the questioning by the angels and Jesus of "Woman, why weepest thou?" The angels and resurrected Jesus both question her mourning over something she should be rejoicing over. But, she is too caught up in her misunderstanding of the situation. When she does recognize Jesus is standing in front of her, she calls Him "rabboni", which is surely an honorific in the worldly sense. But, Jesus is much more than her great teacher.

Jesus then tells her to stop clinging to him in a physical sense. She needs to let go of her ideas of Him as a messiah or rabbi in a physical sense, and understand He is God in the flesh standing before her. He tells her this in v. 17 when He says He is going to ascend to their God, implying He Himself is a God.

Mary then understands Jesus is more than a great teacher, and goes and tells the others that she has seen the Lord. Note her title

for Jesus has changed from "rabboni" in v. 16 to "Lord" in v. 18. This is the difference between v. 16 and v. 18. She stops clinging to her ideas of Jesus as a rabbi, and understands Jesus is the Lord in flesh. Her weeping over losing her beloved rabbi changes to rejoicing in understanding that Jesus is in fact the Lord her God.

v18 Mark 16:11 and Luke 24:11 makes explicit what is otherwise implicit, they didn't believe the women. Mark 16:10 also sets the context a bit better by indicating they were mourning and weeping over the death of Jesus. Thus, they were all emotionally overwrought. Then comes in some of the women insisting they have seen angels who tell them Jesus is still alive. Peter and John go, and they see no angels and no body. Then Mary Magdalene says she has just seen the resurrected Jesus Himself, shortly after Peter and John were just there themselves. Why didn't Jesus show Himself to them when they were just there? The result is they aren't believing something that sounds too good to be true. Perhaps they believe the women are hysterical?

¹⁹ Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. ²⁰ And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD.

²¹ Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: ²³ whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

v19-23 Sunday evening the disciples were gathered together, staying inside, out of public view out of fear, and the resurrected Jesus Christ came to them and greeted them (v. 19). Jesus shows them He is resurrected, with a physical body, and they rejoice at seeing Him (v. 20). Jesus then tells them that even as He has been commissioned by the Father, so He is sending them (v. 21). Jesus then gives them the Holy Spirit (v. 22), as predicted in ch. 14-17.

The intent of the verse is to explain why all of the apostles and disciples were gathered together into a single private place. The doors being shut for fear of the Pharisees is included as a detail not to make Jesus' appearance appear supernatural, but to convey to the reader that the first meeting of the resurrected Jesus was in private, not public. He didn't appear in a public open place to everyone, but among the believers in private.

v19 "when the doors were shut", some translations render "shut" to "locked" even though the [Greek term](#) doesn't necessarily imply that sense. Jesus might have simply opened a closed door and walked in.

There is nothing in the context that requires or forwards a supernatural reading.

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the LORD. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

²⁶ And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. ²⁷ Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. ²⁸ And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God. ²⁹ Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

v24-29 The apostle Thomas is absent when the others see the resurrected Jesus (v. 24) and he refuses to believe them unless he sees it himself (v. 25). A week later the apostles privately gather, this time with Thomas present, and Jesus visits them again (v. 26). Jesus approaches Thomas and asks him to prove it for himself as he previously insisted (v. 27). Thomas is convinced and confesses Jesus is the Lord God of Israel (v. 28). Jesus then blesses Thomas for believing, and says all who believe in Him will be blessed (v. 29).

v24 Remember Thomas Didymus was the one who pledged loyalty to death just weeks earlier, cf. 11:16. Thomas is not weak in faith, and he is not obstinate, as he meets with them a week later. Whatever the reason for his unwillingness to accept the word of the others, he quickly changes his mind and confesses Jesus is the Lord God.

Is Thomas so overwhelmed by grief at Jesus death he cannot believe Jesus isn't dead. Are his hopes for a messianic kingdom dashed, so he doesn't believe anything else? Has his religious conviction been crushed, so he doubts everything, even his own ability to reason through matters of faith and spirituality? Is he so afraid of being executed by the Romans in the same manner as Jesus that he is desperate to avoid affiliation? Is he having difficulty believing the Jesus is in fact the Lord God of Israel? We don't know what the core issue is for Thomas.

v27-28 While Jesus offers to fulfill Thomas' insisted proof from the week earlier (cf. v. 25), it seems in v. 28 that Thomas confesses his believe without actually handling Jesus as he had earlier insisted he must. Simply being in his presence appears to have been enough.

³⁰ And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: ³¹ But these are

written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

v30-31 John lets the reader know Jesus performed many miracles with the disciples, but he doesn't document them here (v. 30). Instead, he wants the readers to believe Jesus is the Messiah, who is the Son of God, so they can have eternal life through Him.

Some commentators see these two verses as the likely colophon for the Gospel of John, and the next chapter to be a later addition. However, there are no ancient textual variants to suggest this is the case, as is the case with 7:53-8:11.

While there is some similarity to the phrasing of 21:24-25, these verses are clearly connected to the preceding story about Thomas, and Jesus' statement in v. 29, about the blessed state of the believer who doesn't have to personally witness the resurrected Jesus to believe.

See also the general comments on ch. 11-20 for the literary connection between these chapters, and the argument that these two verses are the closing statement for that entire block of text, as opposed to the entire book of John.

v30 John's statement in this verse is apparently saying his intent is not to try to convince people based on miracles, but to convince people based on Jesus' words and his own testimony of them. John doesn't want to attract sign seekers.

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