

Critics claim that the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John contradict about the time when the earthquake occurred and the stone was moved at the time of Jesus' resurrection.

"I am struck by a certain consistency among otherwise independent witnesses in placing Mary Magdalene both at the cross and at the tomb on the third day. If this is not a historical datum but something that a Christian storyteller made up and then passed along to others, how is it that this specific bit of information has found its way into accounts that otherwise did not make use of one another? . . . all of our early gospels—not just John and Mark (with Matthew and Luke as well) but also the Gospel of Peter, which appears to be independent of all of them—indicate that it was Mary Magdalen who discovered Jesus' empty tomb. How did all of these independent accounts happen to name exactly the same person in this role? It seems hard to believe



Do the gospels contradict about when the earthquake occurred and the stone was moved at the resurrection of Jesus?

that this just happened by way of a fluke of storytelling. It seems much more likely that, at least with the traditions involving the empty tomb, we are dealing with something actually rooted in history”—Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene, p 226, by Bart Ehrman

“Now after the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave, and behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat on it”—Matthew 28:1-2 LSB; NASB

Most translations render **Matthew 28:2** like the following:

“And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it”—Matthew 28:2 ESV

The somewhat famous agnostic Bible scholar Bart Ehrman (quoted above) admits *“that, at least with the traditions involving the empty tomb, we are dealing with something actually rooted in history.”* But he also claims that the Biblical resurrection accounts are “hopelessly contradictory,” and the four gospel accounts of the earthquake and the rolling away of the stone by an angel early Sunday morning at the time of Jesus’ resurrection is one of these. He, and other critics, claim that Matthew’s account contradicts the gospels of Mark, Luke, and John. Let’s look at these other three inspired gospel accounts now:

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him. Very early on

the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large”—Mark 16:1,2,4 NASB

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb”—Luke 24:1,2 NASB

“On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb”—John 20:1 NASB

Critics, and some modern scholars, claim that Matthew says the earthquake and the stone being rolled away took place *after* the women arrived at the tomb, whereas Mark, Luke, and John say these events happened *before* the women got to the tomb. The popular scholar Bart Ehrman, who has quite a following, is one these. But he is vastly outgunned by the facts themselves, starting with accurate renderings of [Matthew 28:2](#), such as the NASB. The fact is that Matthew **does not say** that the earthquake occurred **before** the women arrived, or that the women actually witnessed the rolling away of the stone. Let's look at what various experts and scholars have to say about the issue of when the earthquake and the stone being rolled away occurred at [Matthew 28:2](#):

“There was: The sense is ‘Now there had been.’ The parallel accounts ([Mk 16:2-6](#); [Lk 24:1-7](#); [Jn 20:1](#)) make it clear that the events of vv. 2-4 occurred before the women actually arrived at the tomb”—NIV Study Bible footnote

“The words imply , not they witnessed the earthquake, but that they inferred it from what they saw”—Ellicott’s Commentary

“There was a great earthquake — Rather there ‘had been.’ It does not mean that this was while they were there”—Barnes Notes on the New Testament

“And behold, there was — that is there had been, before the arrival of the women. Some judicious critics think all this was transacted while the women were approaching, but the view we have given, which is the prevalent one, seems more natural”—Jamison-Fauset -Brown Bible Commentary

“There was a great earthquake . . . or there had been one”—Gill’s Exposition

“The following event took place before their arrival . . . There was a great earthquake”—Pulpit Commentary

“The entire passage seems to be a parenthetical statement. The details concerning the angel and the stone are introduced with the Greek conjunction ‘gar’: ‘And behold, there was a great earthquake; for [Greek, ‘gar’] an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it’ (28:2, emphasis added). Such an explanatory conjunction is used to introduce a clarification of a previous part of the sentence. For Matthew, the angel rolling away the stone is his explanation for the earthquake, not to assert that the women witnessed a stone-moving spectacle. The answer could be further supported by Matthew’s use of an indicative mood in the aorist tense of ‘ginomai’: ‘And behold, there was [Greek, egeneto] a great earthquake’ (28:2, emphasis added). The aorist verb tense in the indicative mood usually denotes the simple part. So a possible translation is ‘an earthquake had occurred,’ implying the women didn’t witness it. Even the angel’s descent can be described as having already occurred, since the aorist participle ‘katabas’ (“descended”) can be translated with English past perfect; ‘for an angel of the Lord has descended (28:2, ISV, emphasis added) . . . How did Matthew know about this stuff? . . . The empty tomb was part of guards story of all that had taken place’ (28:11), it’s possible the details in the parenthetical statement (2-4) were part of it as well”—Biblical Resurrection Actions Are Not ‘Hopelessly Contradictory’ at Catholic.com

With these scholarly comments on **Matthew 28:1,2** in mind, let’s look at the verses again, from a very accurate translation:

“After the Sabbath, in the early dawn of the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to see the sepulchre. But to their amazement there had been a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord had descended from Heaven, and had come and rolled back the stone, and was sitting upon it”— New Testament In Modern Speech, by Richard F. Weymouth

This Bible translation’s footnote to [Matthew 28:2](#) says — *“Had been . . . had come . . . was sitting] Or ‘was . . . came . . . sat.’ Either rendering is possible; but from the other Gospels we learn that the stone was already rolled back when Mary paid her first visit to the tomb (Mark xvi. 3,4; Luke xxiv. 2; John xx. 1).”*

We thus have much solid evidence to prove that there is no contradiction between the account at [Matthew 28:2-4](#) and the accounts of [Mark 16:4-7](#); [Luke 24:1-6](#); [John 20:1](#) about when the earthquake occurred, and the stone was rolled away from Jesus’ tomb.

The inspired gospel accounts are not written to be all inclusive. John, for example, specifically states that his gospel account is not all-inclusive:

“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book”—[John 20:30](#) NIV

“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world could not have room for the books that would be written”—[John 21:25](#) NIV

Notice that John mentions things being “recorded” and “written down,” and admits there are many omissions to his account. These omissions do not cause any contradictions. There is no contradiction in the gospels about when the earthquake occurred and the stone was moved at the time of Jesus’ resurrection.

If you were asked to write a very detailed account of all the things you did, saw, and experienced, during the past week, you could probably write volumes. Now, let's suppose two very close spouses, who were together 100% of the time, were asked to do the same thing. While the experiences and events written down would likely be the same (not counting things forgotten), there would likely be some different details recorded between the two accounts. This helps to illustrate how the inspired four gospels are different in some details, but still 100% accurate.

If the events recorded in the four gospel were virtually identical, they would be suspect of collusion. The reports of when the earthquake occurred and the stone was moved would be smoothed out if there was collusion. The fact is that God **"inspired"** (2 Timothy 3:16 NASB) four different accounts of Jesus' life to be accurately recorded.

"All mankind are like grass, and their glory is like wild flowers. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord remains forever"—1 Peter 1:24,25 GNB

Do the gospels contradict about when the earthquake occurred and the stone was moved? No! While its critics come and go throughout time, the Bible always wins and defeats its critics.