

The Easter gospel lesson's structure

By [John Dart](#)

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"They have taken my Lord away," says a tearful Mary Magdalene, "and I do not know where they have laid him." Mary utters some version of this lament three times in the Easter Sunday reading from John. D. Moody Smith [calls it](#) "an answer of unparalleled poignancy."

I've long been interested in the ancient art of chiastic writing. A chiasm (KY-asm) arranges a text in a concentric structure. Actions, motifs and keywords proceed to the center of the sentence, episode or section and then reappear in reverse order. Chiasms are the ABCBAs of biblical-era storytelling, perhaps used as mnemonic aids for those who would recite to the unlettered majority. (For more on chiasms, read my [Century article](#) on the subject [subscribers only].)

Charles H. Talbert [offers](#) a four-step chiasm for Sunday's 18-verse episode:

A: Mary carries a message to the disciples based on what she saw.

B: Two disciples [Peter and beloved disciple] come to the tomb;
[Peter] looks in and sees; the other goes in, sees, and believes.

B': Mary at the tomb, looks in; later sees Jesus and believes.

A': Mary carries a message to the disciples based on what she has seen and heard.

However, Smith's [commentary on John](#) suggests that a poor transition between the disciples' look-see and Mary's experience, along with a lack of support from the other gospels, "raises the question of whether the episode of Peter and the Beloved Disciple is a later insertion into a traditional text."

What if John 20:3-10 was not in the text? A well-crafted chiasm emerges in verses 1-2, 11-18:

A: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ["The other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" may have been inserted in place of "the other disciples," and there may have been an additional verse stating that the disciples did not believe the women, as in Luke 24:11.]

B: But Mary [returned and] stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet.

C (a): They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

(b): She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

(c): When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

C' (a'): Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

(b'): Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

(c'): Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means "Teacher").

B' Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

A': Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.