

Easter Day 2018

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. John 20.1

We celebrate the resurrection with light. Last night, we kindled a fire and blessed a candle. We carried the candle into the church, proclaimed the Easter gospel and bathed ourselves with light. We began, however, in darkness. And we did so because the story of the resurrection begins in darkness. And this is not just the metaphorical darkness of the death of Christ, the imprisonment of the light of the world in the darkness of the tomb. The story of the resurrection begins in darkness because it was dark when Mary Magdalen came to the tomb. This is the story of the new creation, and like the first story of creation it begins in darkness, it takes place in a garden, and it involves a woman and a man. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.

What does she see? She sees that which she does not expect. Not a grave as a grave is supposed to be. The tomb was sealed, she saw that happen herself, but now she comes back and sees that the stone has been rolled away. There is no body, there is no Jesus, there is just emptiness. A grave without a body, a tomb which has been robbed. And, remember, it is dark. There is barely enough light to see the little she can discern – that all is not as it should be, that something terrible has happened. She can just about peer into the tomb, and she knows she should not be able to. And she can just about see that there is nothing there. The body of the Lord has been taken away.

The story of the resurrection is the story of staring into darkness. That which we fear the most, the death over which we humans have no power, is kept safely behind the solid rock of the sepulchre. We know it is in there, and we want it to stay there. We want death to be in its proper place so that we can pretend to be unafraid. Pretend. Truth is. we are afraid. Of death and its

darkness, yes, but afraid just as much of the darkness of our own lives, of the places we seal off for protection, of the aspects of ourselves that we would rather not consider, of the doubts and the fears of our day to day existence, of the shame and the hatred of ourselves and of others which we know in our honesty to be there, but have no desire to observe, still less confront. The darkness is the right place for such things, we do not want to see them.

The resurrection begins in darkness. As God confronts us with the emptiness of the tomb he is daring us to stare into the abyss, to ask ourselves whether we really are prepared to look into that darkness and see what can be discerned. God is picking at our fear and our self-hatred, gently but insistently pushing us further into that tomb, challenging us to blink our way into some sort of vision, to accustom our eyesight to the darkest places, to enable ourselves to learn something from that which we think we cannot see. The resurrection begins in darkness, and that darkness exists in every one of us.

It is too easy to look at the world, to look at ourselves, and to stay rooted to the hillside of Good Friday. To give thanks that God embraces the depth of human suffering, to know that solidarity with the pain and the treachery and the darkness is solidarity with the divine, but not to consider the consequences of such a claim. It is too easy to mourn evil, and to live forever with our grief. It is too easy to be afraid, and to stay secure in our fear. But Mary Magdalene did not stay. She followed the body to the tomb, she returned out of faith and hope and love, to do what she thought that she could. Returning, she found a darkness deeper, more disconcerting, emptier than anything she had ever known in herself. But, and this is the crucial point, it was a darkness where God had already been. It was an absence which God had already filled.

The joy of the resurrection is only ours by participation, but it is first and foremost the joy of God's love. All that we do through Lent: denying ourselves, engaging in

self-examination, looking at the world and its evils, reflecting on the darkest parts and places of our lives and our histories, daring to look into ourselves to the things we would rather conceal, to the truths we would rather remained hidden, all our confronting the darkness in our own selves is something God has already done. That is why the tomb is empty. That is why God is not there. If he wanted to, Jesus could be marching up and down the garden in a procession of earthly triumph. But it would be earthly triumph, it would be staying put, it would be remaining in the darkness instead of moving through and beyond it. That is what we are so determined to do, to project the goodness of God somewhere else, somewhere over there, somewhere away from us, and comfort ourselves that our own fears and hatreds remain secure, that our own darkness is tucked safely deep within us and nothing can place it under threat.

The joy of the resurrection, is God's response to our darkness. Christ is risen, whether we like it or not. Love

will not be contained, whether we like it or not. There we stand, blinking in the half light, staring into the emptiness of the grave, staring into the emptiness of ourselves, refusing to realise that *emptiness is what it is*, unable to recognise *that there is nothing there*. Meanwhile, God stands among us, laughing his head off. Why are you looking in there? I've been there, it's over. There is nothing there, there is nothing there because I have already been there, because I am the one who brings something where there is nothing, because however deeply you fear the darkness I will go further to redeem it, I will overcome it, I will enlighten your fear. Why are you looking in there? I've been there, there's nothing, it's time to move on.

This joy, this divine laughter, is not mocking or ridicule. It's simply the response of infinite love to the persistence, the recalcitrance, the determination of our fears and self-hatred. That's all very well, we insist, but there is still the darkness of my inner life, the void which is my soul. Wrong, entirely wrong. God knows

how wrong we are, but God does not condemn us. He simply laughs. He laughs the laugh of love. Love is triumphant, whether we like it or not. Forgiveness is real, whether we like it or not. God laughs in the joy of the resurrection. Christ is risen. Love is alive. God has filled the tomb with laughter. And when we hear laughter, we want to join in.