

It seems hopelessly presumptuous to preach about Easter. Everything that could possibly be said about it already has been, by people who are great saints, erudite theologians, holy divines or accomplished evangelists. In fact it is impossible to say anything about God at all. He is so far beyond our understanding that any words we use about him are utterly inadequate. God just is. 'I am who I am', God says to Moses in one translation, which does at least convey the idea that any attempt to name or describe God in words is bound to fail. Any encounter with God is entirely mysterious, and yet it is so important that people have striven for centuries to explain to other people what they have experienced. And so here we are, early on a Sunday morning, gathered to celebrate something utterly extraordinary and beyond our comprehension – and having to do it in words. Given the inadequacy of words, let me try to paint a picture.

'On the first day of the week, at early dawn', begins today's Gospel reading. St John gives us more detail. 'Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark....' While it was still dark. It had started at noon three days earlier, when darkness had come over the land at noon, and for Jesus' followers it was still dark. They dared not show their faces in case the authorities were still looking for them, and without their leader, their inspiration, the man they believed was the Son of God, their spirits were in darkness. Their hopes were in ruins and there was nothing to live for.

But while it was still dark, the women took spices and went to the tomb. It can't have been a familiar journey. The burial place was outside the city wall, it was on a hill, the path must have been uneven and stony. There was no light, unless there was a moon. And it would be dark inside the tomb; would they be able to see what they were to do there? Maybe they took torches. Imagine the scene. A dark sky with the slightest tinge of light low down in the east, the black bulk of a rocky hillside, and two or three pinpricks of light moving slowly across it – faltering – turning occasionally to check whether this or that was the right place.

Even this picture is inadequate. It is still dark. We cannot see any more clearly than the women could. But something amazing has been happening in the darkness. The man who was the Son of God, who in three short years showed his disciples what perfect humanity was like, who attracted thousands to be taught, fed and healed, who had to be put to death by people fearful for their own status and authority, and whose body had been placed in a sealed tomb guarded by a detachment of soldiers, is no longer there.

The women, stumbling to the tomb entrance as dawn begins to break, expect to find a huge stone barring their way. But it has moved, and instead of a dark interior there is a blaze of light. The stone, a perfect metaphor for difficulty, obfuscation and prohibition, is no longer a barrier. They are met by two angels in dazzling white. God's promise, begun in the incarnation and completed in the resurrection, has been fulfilled. The women remember Jesus' words. Now, in the light of day, they make their way back, sure-footed this time because they can see where they are going, and tell the disciples what they have seen. But, of course, they have to use words, and (with the exception of Peter who is looking for even the slightest hint of comfort in his guilt and despair) they are not believed. Peter goes to see, and is amazed at what has happened. Easter is light, revelation, seeing clearly, understanding what has been obscured for so long. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

I'm sure that, like me, you watched with dismay the TV footage of Notre-Dame burning, the fire becoming more intense as night fell until, much later when the fire was finally under control, there was a stark, roofless silhouette against a dark sky. Then someone (presumably a firefighter) took a picture of the interior. Technically it's a terrible photo. Everything is out of

focus. It's still dark – there is just the faintest hint of first light coming through the windows. One lamp reveals the extent of the damage for the first time. There is swirling smoke, debris, destruction, and yet, shining clearly through the darkness is the great cross, still gleaming gold, a symbol of hope for rebirth and renewal. It would be hard to find a better metaphor for that first Easter morning. I offer it to you as a remembrance of this Easter morning, and of God's promise to us all fulfilled in the death and resurrection of his Son. He is risen – Alleluia!

