

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being through him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

These are the first few verses of the Gospel written by St John. They are normally read at Christmas, and no, I haven’t lost the plot. In case anyone is having a slight sense of *déjà entendu* you’re right. I did read exactly the same words at the start of my sermon on Good Friday. John begins his gospel by describing the mystery of the incarnation, setting it in the context of an almighty struggle, the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness. And on Good Friday we saw the darkness deepening and intensifying. Jesus went from the brightness of the room where he ate his last supper with the disciples, out into the darkness of the garden of Gethsemane; he was then taken in the dark first to the High Priest and then to Pilate. Then he walked to Golgotha to be crucified, and in the middle of the day the sky itself went dark. Finally his body was placed in a dark tomb cut out of the rock, shut in with a huge stone across the entrance and guarded by soldiers. As events unfolded everything became literally and metaphorically darker. It seemed that the forces of ignorance, prejudice, greed, intolerance and power had triumphed. And again it was night, followed by a day which should have been one of celebration – the feast of the Passover, which commemorated the escape of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt and their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea into freedom. Jesus had eaten the Passover meal with his disciples only the evening before, but there was no celebration now. For Jesus’s followers, this was the darkest of days.

The Jewish sabbath customs prevented anyone from going to the tomb until the following day. But as soon as they could, the women hurried back. As dawn broke, as the first light crept gradually over the landscape, they began to see their surroundings more distinctly. There was the garden, there was the tomb, there were the soldiers. In other gospels the women wondered how they could move the stone; in John’s version Mary Magdalene came alone and saw that it had already been moved. But it was still dark; she peered in and all that she could make out was that the body was not there. John came running, followed by Peter; they too looked, but in the gloom of early dawn they could see little. Peter went in, followed by John, but they did not really understand and went back home. But Mary stayed, wept, looked again, and saw angels.

I always envisage this scene taking place as the full light of the risen sun first hits the rock and the tomb, the brilliant white of the angels’ robes and the golden sunlight combining in a glorious revelation. It has never rained in my Easter morning imagination. And as Mary, almost blinded by what she had seen, turned to go back to Jerusalem, she saw the figure of Jesus. She heard her name called - how could she not reach out to him? He was not dead. He had been raised, as he had promised. His words were true. Her hopes, which had seemed dead, were suddenly alive again. She had seen the Lord.

In Matthew’s account, which we heard at the dawn service today, there is an angel and an earthquake, echoing the earthquake which was felt at the moment that Jesus died. And the angel’s words were about vision and understanding, about being in the light. ‘Come and see

where he lay....go to Galilee, there you will see him'. We need light to see, and there, after the darkest of days, there is brilliant light.

Whichever of the four gospel resurrection narratives we read, the light is always there. Peter and John come to the tomb and they see, though they do not understand. The other women come and see. The two on the road to Emmaus share a meal with Jesus and they see. The disciples in the Upper Room see. Even the soldiers, who had been shaken rigid by the appearance of the angel, see – and they went back to Jerusalem and told the priests, who promptly conspired with the city authorities to bribe them to spread a completely false story. I wonder – was one of them the centurion who, three days earlier, had seen that Jesus was the Son of God?

It was not dark any more. It was glorious daylight, and there was the best possible proof of the truth of Jesus's words: 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up', and 'A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me'. There was direct, first-hand, eye-witness evidence from so many different people that it could not be denied. With Mary Magdalene, they had all seen the Lord. The light that came into the world had triumphed, the darkness had not overcome it and it could not be hidden.

In one sense it is quite extraordinary that we are here today celebrating something that happened more than 2,000 years ago. How can it possibly be relevant to us here, now, with all the changes and all the discoveries that have taken place over that time? Surely by now we don't need all that primitive stuff? Surely with all our advances in science and technology we have got past ancient beliefs? We know how the world works. We can do brain surgery and change the genetic profile of living organisms; we can manufacture new molecules and go into space; we can break matter down into its most minute fundamental components, and build it up again to create entirely new elements which have never existed naturally. But no-one has ever been able to counter that direct first-hand eye-witness evidence that a man called Jesus, who was the son of God, was crucified, died, and rose again from the dead. Nobody else has ever been seen to die by a whole crowd of people, has been buried and then has been seen alive again by many different people in different places. Just as the Israelites passed out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, so Jesus passed from life through death and on to life again.

Because of this we can be certain that God's promises, transmitted through the prophets and by Jesus himself, are true. There is hope. There is mercy, grace, forgiveness for all our wrongdoing and faults. There is salvation and there is eternal life. All we have to do to take our share in this is to accept, to believe, and to do our best to follow Jesus. 'I have seen the Lord!' said Mary Magdalene, and we can see the risen Lord through her eyes. Jesus said: 'I am the light of the world', and we can walk in his light. The darkness of Good Friday has turned into a glorious dawn. 'This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it'. Alleluia!