

**Easter Day – John 20:1-18**  
**'while it was still dark...'**

This is a day of celebration and rejoicing. But it's not how the day started – not back then, on that first Easter Day. As John says, it began 'while it was still dark...' It began with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb, grieving because on the Friday her beloved friend and teacher had been brutally executed. With his death her hopes and dreams had died. Now, to compound the pain, his body had gone. She couldn't even spend some time with his mortal remains, caring for it and mourning her loss. It was all dark.

It's a very real picture because that's how it can be for us. We know about grief – an aching loss, deep despair, the feeling of hopelessness. Something or someone who mattered so much to us has gone, has died, has been lost. Or perhaps it's the darkness of self-doubt, of depression, anxiety, or some personal heartbreak. Then there's the darkness of a world caught in the grip of human injustice, bigotry, and conflict. Yet, here we are, shouting out our Alleluias – celebrating and delighting in the joy of the greatest day of the church's year.

How does today fit into all this darkness? How does God relate to it? I accept the Easter story, not as a nice tale, but as a reality, because *it starts in the dark*. And that's because it's in the darkness that we so often meet God. We encounter God in the dark places of life. Friday showed us God sharing the darkness – sharing our suffering, sharing our questions and doubts, sharing our inevitable death. On Friday, on the cross, we saw God in Jesus, with us in the darkest of all places that we can go. And that's where Mary Magdalene was.

Mary was outside the empty tomb, crying her heart out. 'They've taken my Lord.' Then a man, whom she assumed was the gardener, asked her why she was weeping and who she was looking for? All that Mary wanted was for him to return Jesus' body. But then the man said her name: 'Mary!' Stunned, she could only say, 'Rabbouni!' It was Mary's favourite name for her beloved Jesus. It was a tender moment. Her name was uttered, and she recognised who the man was. The darkness lifted. Her beloved Jesus was alive. Jesus, the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness, had not been extinguished by the evil deeds of humankind – not even by death itself.

In the darkness Mary heard her name spoken. The mention of our names is more than just a word uttered. It can be an immensely intimate moment. When we were baptised, our names were spoken as water was poured over us and we become a beloved child of God – a sister, a brother of the same Jesus that Mary met in the garden on Easter morning. To hear a loved one utter our name speaks of a relationship, a history, a shared life – and that's how it is between the risen Christ and us.

What we celebrate today is a profound mystery. I've no idea about the 'how' of it all. What I believe, what I trust, what I give my life to, is Jesus Christ crucified and now risen from the dead. This morning, when we come to communion and eat the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation, we may hear in our hearts of hearts, our name spoken. We may hear the risen Christ telling us that we are his beloved one – that in the darkness he's with us – and will be with us always – and that not even death can separate us from his love.

That's what Mary heard, and out of her joy she went to hug Jesus. But he wouldn't have it. 'Don't hold on to me,' he said. If I were writing the story I would've included at this point a long tearful embrace. But then, when I think about it, that's how it needs to be. What matters is not that we hold onto Jesus, but that we know that he will take hold of us – holding us in a love from which nothing, not even death, can separate us. Even in the darkness of death he's there – somehow making the end of this life the beginning of something new – telling us that death does not have the final word. And that in this life,

we receive foretastes, hints, of what that may be, as we experience new life in the countless small deaths we experience – as the Risen Christ meets us in our dark places.

This morning, as we witness a baptism, and then renew our own baptismal promises, know that you are God's beloved son, God's beloved daughter – you are a sister, a brother of Jesus Christ – as much as Mary Magdalene is. As she met Christ in the darkness, so he desires to meet you, gifting you with a new beginning and new hope.

Today is not the commemoration of something from nearly two thousand years ago. It's about meeting the risen Christ and discovering him in the darkness today. It's about hearing Jesus say our name. It's about allowing him to lead us to a new beginning, a new opportunity, a new hope, a new life. It's about knowing God who is love – who takes hold of us for all time and for all eternity.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

*Alister Hendery – Hastings, 2023*