

The ancient story is told of a rabbi who gathered all his students together very early in the morning while it was still dark. He told them to pay attention because he had a very important question to ask them. The question was this: how could they tell when night had ended and the day was on its way back.

One student answered “Could it be when you see an animal and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

Another student said “Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

After a few more guesses the students demanded “Well then, what is it?”

“It is when you look into the face of any woman or man and see that she is your sister and he is your brother. Because if you cannot do this then no matter what time it is, it is still night.”

For John, as we heard in his Gospel, the Easter story begins very early in the morning of the first day of the week when it is “still dark.” But the Easter story has its finest expression in the new life in Christ, when, as John tells us,

the night is over

And the real light is already shining.

Anyone who claims to be in the light

But hates his brother

Is still in the dark (1 John 2: 8-9)

The Easter we celebrate is an invitation out of darkness into the light of the risen Christ. In that light we see him and recognise each other as brother and sister in the Lord. It is that light which enables us to know that night has ended and day is on its way back.

Easter began in the dark and began in the tomb. The story begins with someone who many had written off as a lost cause: Mary Magdalene. When she reaches the tomb she sees that the stone is rolled away, and she interprets this to mean that Jesus’ body must have been stolen. She finds it easier to believe in the night-time antics of grave robbers than the night-time antics of God who refuses to let death have the last word.

When Peter and the Beloved Disciple hear her story they immediately start running for the tomb, and we have a marvellous picture of the Easter jog! The Beloved Disciple runs faster than Peter, reaches the tomb first, looks in to see the cloths lying on the ground, and then waits for Peter. Peter goes in and sees the cloths. The climax of the story is when the Beloved Disciple goes in and sees the same evidence: in contrast to Peter, he believes. He sees more than discarded cloths; he sees with the eyes of faith what this means. His is a love that sees through the dark.

One of the marks of John's Gospel is the special love between Jesus and one of the disciples. The Beloved Disciple is presented as the ideal follower of Jesus, the one who is closest to him at the Last Supper, and the one who stands at the foot of the cross when he dies. Now in running to the tomb on Easter morning, the urgency of his love gets him there first, and the sensitivity of his love makes him the first to believe.

If Peter enjoys the "primacy of authority", the Beloved Disciple enjoys the "primacy of love." This takes nothing away from Peter. It just means that, in Paul's phrase, "if love can persuade" it can get you to the point quicker !

So this morning we look to the quality of our own seeing and our own hope, so that when the time comes we too will have the love to enable us to see through the dark. In celebrating Easter we rejoice in the light that darkness cannot overpower; we celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead and that he extends that homecoming to all of us; we bless God for the faith that challenges us always to see more in others because we love him.

In that Easter faith we can answer the question of the old rabbi. We can tell that night is gone and the day is on its way back when we can look on the face of our brother and sister and see something extraordinary. We can catch a glimpse of the Messiah.