

St. John begins his account of resurrection day with his favourite gospel theme, that of darkness and light which mirrors ignorance and a lack of understanding with dawning realisation. This whole chapter has characters who don't understand, or misunderstand but he slips in there that he, the beloved disciple was the first to believe.

The old apostle, looking back over the years and familiar with the gospel accounts of Mark and Matthew and Luke is able to craft his narrative differently and today's reading reveals that he is the first to believe and Mary the first to meet the risen Saviour.

The Gospel isn't written like a film script with the tension mounting and mounting towards the moment Mary realises who Jesus is (although it is a glorious scene) because we already know and the church to whom he was writing already knew the story. What is John seeking to emphasise in his account??

I wonder if it's the same point made two different ways.

Mary discovers the stone has gone and that suggests either grave robbers or the authorities up to no good, so Peter and John race to the tomb. John tells us he won the race BUT he doesn't go in. Peter arrives and being Peter goes straight in and John follows.

They both see exactly the same things, the linen wrapping lying there and the cloth from the head folded and to one side. This is no robbery and it's inconceivable the authorities would remove the cloths to move the body.

There is no further comment about St. Peter, but John tells us that this is moment he started to believe.

What is it he believed?

Had we been there to ask him I think he may have struggled to articulate the words but an empty tomb, the empty linen wrappings in place and the folded head cloth were enough, he believes.

This is so far out of his experience and comprehension John doesn't know what to expect. Does he expect to see Jesus? Does he think Jesus has ascended to the Father? Does he say words to himself like "risen", "resurrection", "alive". We cannot know, but his belief started at the empty tomb.

Where does belief begin? For John, it was the empty tomb. He is the beloved disciple further on in his understanding that God is love and that love is eternal. The Lord whom he loved would not and could not mislead him and death was not the end.

His loving relationship allowed him to start believing in an empty tomb.

The Christian church is formed by remarkable people because we expect joy out of grief, life out of death, blessing from tragedy. We, those we know and news from people worldwide can all tell of the accidents, tragedies and misery that life can bring and a shared pandemic is just that, and yet we know the stories don't end in death and separation and eternal nothingness. We believe.

Even when we can't articulate what it is we believe (and I don't think John could have done at the time) we have within ourselves a living hope and expectation.

John adds to his account, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead". On hearing the news of an empty tomb none of the disciples hauled out an old testament and started confirming what was going on – the intellectual

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understanding that we seek to develop through confirmation and study and sermons and house groups and so on is hugely important...but I think John is telling us that belief doesn't rely on that. I think John would say it starts in relationship.

The second part of the story then focuses on Mary and again we have misunderstanding, not seeing, partly seeing, raw emotion, the darkness of loss and incomprehension. But light floods in and it changes in one word. Her name.

Jesus calls her name and she calls to him the word that means the most to her "teacher". It's not the name John would have used, but it's the name Mary responds with.

To be known by name is a very powerful thing. Think of a wedding. When the couple say their vows they speak directly to one another and use their own and each others full names (which is why giving two or three middle names to please the family can backfire slightly!!)

Then when they exchange rings they use the more familiar shorter names.

There's no doubt as to who this couple are. They name themselves and each other aloud before everyone. Your beloved names you!

And we glimpse this beautiful scene of love at the empty tomb, Mary's sorrow turns to joy. John is the first to believe, Mary the first to meet Jesus. He calls her name

One again it's relationship that is being emphasised and it echoes another of John's themes; Jesus said "I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me".

Revd. Jon Hutchinson

Do you know yourself to be loved by God and called by name? Many of us would say yes and how we have "heard" or "felt" or understood God's love and calling will be unique to each of us. There will be those who haven't experienced their faith in quite that way but nevertheless have that re-assurance and experience of God's love and having a relationship with our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Now John ends his account of the tomb with Mary going to tell the disciples "I have seen the Lord" and our impetus must be towards others.

In learning from today's passage and St. John the beloved disciple I was thinking about how I pray for those for whom faith is a puzzling story of an empty tomb and belief is yet to begin.

I'm going to pray that those I name before God discover they are known and loved by God individually. He knows and loves them. And that they experience the love of God so that a relationship, (probably quite one way to begin with) can start to develop and that belief, even without understanding, can also begin, because to be called by name is very powerful.

You might like to join me and I would love to share naming the people you love and pray for before God, so please get in touch direct and it will be a prayer we share.

And, I pray in hope and expectation that there will come an Easter day when those for whom we pray will be here, with all of the church gathered together, sitting close, no masks, singing aloud and joyously responding.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed – Hallelujah.