

Morningside

16/ 4/ 17

John 20: 1-10.

Easter

Please call me John. Johnny-come-lately would be more like it. It was only near the end that I became part of the group. The others – you know, Pete and Matt and Jimmy and Mary (do you remember the woman from Magdala) and the rest – they had been going around with him for years before I got involved. But in the last few months something really clicked with me and I found myself suddenly at the very heart of things.

Who was it who was sitting right next to him on the Thursday night? the night when he told us that one of us would betray him and I blurted out “Which one? Who is it?” And the chill, the evil chill, in that hot room on that hot night when he passed the bread to Judas Iscariot.

You would think that it might have got up the noses of the twelve that incomers like me became part of the inner circle. But somehow that didn't seem to happen. There were quite a few of us. I've already mentioned Mary from Magdala: I hate it when people who don't read the stories properly call her a prostitute: she was nothing of the kind. That was a different woman entirely. Mary had had her problems, true enough. She'd had had mental health problems. But his care for her and his patience with her made her into a strong, dignified woman. By the end she was one of the leaders of the group. When the Friday afternoon horror came and we saw his body broken on the cross before our eyes the only ones of all of us – the only ones of all of us there to see it were Mary, and another Mary, and his own mother, and me.

Johnny-come-lately if you like: but I was there when the talking stopped.

Actually it was another nickname they gave me. It sounds stupid and I didn't deserve it for a moment. Even now I'm embarrassed to tell you: but they sometimes called me "the beloved disciple". Of course he loved us all: I mean that. All of us, including Judas. And not only the Twelve. But people seemed to sense that he loved me in a special way. I certainly felt it: but of course I knew the mess my life had been in when he first found me.

Do you remember I said I was among the last. But on one day that really mattered I was first. The very first. You would have backed Peter against me any day in a race: especially if you knew what I had done to my body in my young days. After all his years on the boats, you should have seen the muscles on him. But on that one day we were running hard as we could and somehow I was too fast for him. "Cometh the hour, cometh the man": have you heard them say that? I got there first. But I wonder if Peter was really trying. I think something was holding him back. Maybe he was even more scared than I was.

I'll not forget that Sunday morning: although it is not for outrunning the big man that I will remember it. When I got there, my chest heaving and dripping with sweat, what did I see? Nothing. I'm not good at explaining it, although hundreds and hundreds of people have asked me to. What I saw was nothing. I don't quite mean that I didn't see anything. I mean I saw – well – nothing. I saw some white cloths: and apart from that - nothing. Just emptiness

Then Peter pushed past me and went in. I stayed outside, trying to work out what was going on. When he came out, I went inside. And when I came out again, I believed.

I said that to myself. “I believe”; then I said it again. So much so that when I got back to the others and they asked us what had happened, while Peter went into great detail about the burial cloths he had seen, all I could say for myself was “I believe”. And do you know this? to this day I am not sure what I meant.

They shouted at me “What do you mean? Do you mean that you believe that Mary was telling the truth?” For Mary had been at the tomb while it was still dark; and by this time the others knew that she had told Peter and me that they had taken him out of the tomb. Well, it was yes and no. I did believe Mary and her story: but it was a lot deeper than that. It was as if I was sensing something completely new. I was coming to see something I had not ever felt before.

Do you remember that I said that Mary and I were the only ones of the whole bunch who had actually been there when he died? They say that after someone you love dies some people need to see the dead body to know for sure that a person has died. Well, I certainly knew for sure that he was dead. And now, here, when I told them that I believed, I think I was saying that I was sure that he had left death behind.

Does it make any sense to tell you that when I said I believed I didn't know what I believed? At least you will agree that that morning was for me like no other morning in my whole life, so maybe you can understand that I was struggling then to put it into words: and I think I am struggling still. But now, all those years later, I can put my hand on my heart and tell you that that morning I believed that he had conquered death: and I can tell you that I believe that still. I remembered him saying that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed; and on the third day he would be raised. And there and then I believed.

There was so much I did not know on that morning. I had not yet seen him resurrected and alive: it would be later that day that he would actually come among us and show us his wounds and say “Peace be with you”. On that first morning I did not know what it would be like to believe that he was alive and with us; I did not know how to speak about him as the risen one. All that would only come gradually. But what I had seen that Sunday morning told me that he had defeated death.

People often ask me why I was chosen. Why should I be the first to believe? To tell the truth, I’ve often asked the same question. The only answer I can come up with is that it must be something to do with love. That was what people used to say about me, if you remember. They hardly ever called me John: they called me the beloved disciple.

I think love is what you need if you want to believe. Brains can be a help: If you’ve never heard my friend Paul in full flow you’ve never heard what brains can do for faith. Experience can be a help. If you had seen Thomas a week after that first Sunday when he told him to put his hands into his wounds you would know how his faith was transformed by the experience. But most of all love is what you need.

I was the very first because I loved him and I knew that he loved me. That is what you need most for believing on Easter Day. To love him and to know that he loves you. Death is not strong enough to keep that love in a box. As usual Paul hit the nail on the head: “Death no longer has dominion over him”

Years afterwards an old man said something beautiful about me. He remembered that I used to be called “the beloved disciple”: and he said that I was so close to Jesus that I could hear his heart beating.

