

Called by name

[John 20:1-18](#) | 16th April 2017 (Easter)

What do you make of this? One disciple sees and believes. Another sees the same thing, remains unsure. A third follower needs to hear her name spoken. John leaves space for each. The risen Jesus comes to each, then; and to these three types - and more - now. Three responses to resurrection. In their helpful variety we might find a place for our faith to lodge, and be nudged forward this Easter.

First, there's Peter. Big and impetuous throughout life, he falls behind in the race to the tomb but doesn't let uncertainty, fear or his swifter-running friend get in the way of finding out what's happening. Going straight in he sees what is there - and what is not. He observes, in some detail, but he doesn't see behind any of it. The significance of it doesn't appear at that point to have hit home.

Second to enter the tomb is the unnamed, hesitant sprinter. He arrives first, but stops and only after Peter has entered does he. However, he not only sees what is in front of him, but recognises something of its significance. He 'sees and believes' - though the narrative specifically says neither of them understood what was going on, and it seems they weren't thinking that Jesus had been raised from death.

If it had been left to the men, how far would Christian faith have got that day? We would have known something had happened, and that there was something missing. But no more, and not even a hint of understanding from the scriptures to guide us.

And then John provides a quite extended account of Mary's conversation first with two messengers, or angels, and then with the risen Christ. It is, in the

circumstances, astonishingly restrained. He asks why she weeps. She asks where the body is, that she might get it. Looked at one way, this is fairly normal. And then he calls her by her name and, at that point, somehow, she recognises him. Here is a third 'seeing': not simply the bare facts, nor even facts overlaid with belief. Here is an encounter with Jesus, raised to new life - certainly not merely resuscitated from death. She is asked not to keep this quite incredible discovery to herself, and not simply to remain there with Jesus, but to share the news with his other friends. She needs, somehow, to tell what she has seen. And her testimony could not have been more straightforward: 'I have seen the Lord!'



The empty tomb is problematic, and raises as many questions as it answers. Even if you had heard, an hour later, from Peter and had gone there yourself, there would still have been enough uncertainty to cause you to doubt. It is not the empty tomb that matters so much in the narrative, though it does provide immensely strong images. What matters most is that, in the midst of death, the Lord of life calls you by name.

Fast forward nearly two thousand years. An independent but fair-minded scholarly historian who is sympathetic to Christianity, but who doesn't let the wool be pulled over his eyes, has this assessment:

'Christianity's central message is the story of a person, Jesus, whom Christians believe is ... an aspect of the God who was, and is, and ever shall be, yet who is at the same time a human being, set in historic time. Christians believe that they can still meet this human being in a fashion comparable to the experience of the disciples who walked with him in Galilee and saw him die on the Cross. They are convinced that this meeting transforms lives, as has been evident in the experience of other Christians across the centuries.' (MacCulloch, p.1)

That's the kernel of Easter. Can God in the Christ of Easter change things? Is it possible for things to be different? The earliest followers of Jesus were transformed, not so much by the empty tomb but by their experience of meeting him raised from death. As they lived this out in challenging circumstances where it would often have been far easier to give up than to go on in faith, their commitment to this once-dead and now-alive leader showed there are ways of living together which are not tribal, anxious or violent but are, rather, welcoming, trusting and peace-making.

It is possible to live 'really, truly and fully in God's future, beginning now' (as Rowan Williams puts it). Mary's words, 'I have seen the Lord,' speak of a transforming encounter, one in which the risen Christ calls her by name and then gives her a task to do. The risen Christ still does that this Easter Day. God is alive, present now and able to be encountered even, and perhaps especially, in the face of death and loss. God can rule, and we can be part of his kingdom.

Today, do you see the Lord? Do you believe? Do you understand, at least a little? And do you have some sense of wanting to share something of this in action and words? For this is Easter. 'Christ is alive,' writes Brian Wren, ' and comes to bring good news to this and every age, till earth and all creation ring with joy, with justice, love and praise.' Thanks be to God, 'who raised Jesus from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God.'

Read further...

Diarmid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, available at <http://amzn.eu/7mE0kqD>

Rowan Williams, *God with Us*, especially the section on Resurrection, available at <http://amzn.eu/bKfgy06>

Brian Wren, *Christ is alive! Let Christians sing* at <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/c/c055.html>