

RECOGNISING JESUS IN THE NEW NORMAL: 1. MARY

John 20:11-16.

One incident in John's gospel has been intriguing me. It's still dark—5 am? Mary plus a few others are at the tomb where the remains of Jesus had been laid out. The boulder has gone. The body has gone. John gets there first and looks in from the door. Peter comes puffing past and goes straight in. Eventually John does too, and it starts to make sense—for him at least.

Now this is the bit that captivated me. Peter and John go back to their accommodation—under lockdown. Doors bolted and barred because they're frightened. Mary is left behind outside the tomb—distraught. Has a quick conversation with two guys. Bear in mind that she didn't realise they were angels. She's like all of us. Unusual experiences only make sense with hindsight. Next she turns round and sees Jesus but she thinks he's the gardener.

So why. Because it was still dark. She was crying. Misty eyed? Possible. But there's got to be more to it than that. For one thing, she had probably seen Jesus most days in the previous few years. For another, lots of grieving people think they see or feel their loved ones, months after the event. So it would make sense if it had been the other way round—if she imagined that a real life gardener was Jesus. Here's my take on what was happening. It helps me and it may help you. The friends of Jesus were in a situation that was genuinely unprecedented. A week before they had been the centre of big crowds; palm branches, Hosannas. In the following few days their leader had been challenging the establishment vandalising the temple market. Things were happening more or less like they had expected. High risk but on track.

Then in just 72 hours. Chaos.

- Jesus had been arrested.
- The the cheering crowd had disappeared or switched sides.
- The man they had given up everything for...was dead.

Unprecedented circumstances and under lockdown. Because they feared government reaction. Even Mary—somebody who was pretty much in touch with her emotions was struggling to take it all in. Dealing with a changed reality is more than a little bit tricky for most of us. How else could she not have recognised somebody she saw most days.

Mary is a reassuring model for me. Even in the best of times, we can find it hard to be aware of the closeness of God. And in our new normal, this unprecedented new time, when we can't meet up and it even feels strange to go to the shops, we may need to be more attentive, focus more intently on feeling for—reaching out for—the Spirit. In unprecedented times the reality of Jesus may be harder to recognise for those who have learned to draw close to him previously in a more familiar world.

The Spirit's closeness may be more difficult to sense in the new normal. But the FACT remains that God is here—just the same—and we have the opportunity to be more deeply aware of him in more different ways, because God is not socially distanced—we're not isolated from him.

Lets look at that fact. According to Matthew, the final thing Jesus did was to offer a guarantee of his company to Mary, Peter, John and all his followers in all places at all times. In that sense nothing is unprecedented. Matthew signs off his gospel with Jesus saying: 'Be sure of this: I am

with you always, even to the end of time.’ (Matt 28:20) We exercise faith in that fact. We build our confidence when we take ourselves in hand. We relearn that God has said, ‘Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you,’ (Heb 13:5) and often (not always, but increasingly) our feelings will get into line with that reality—FACTS, FAITH, FEELINGS. Come close to God and he will come close to you.

Just one thing to take away with you. In unprecedented circumstances, if you can’t recognise Jesus listen out for his voice. After all you know he promised to be near.