

RECOGNISING JESUS IN THE NEW NORMAL: 3. THE UPPER ROOM

John 20:19-21.

In the last two weeks we've talked about what happened on Easter Day.

We've been impressed with Mary #1 who didn't recognise Jesus when she saw him but responded immediately he said her name. Perhaps we have had more in common with Mary number two and her husband who didn't have the faintest idea who Jesus was when they saw him, or even when they heard him speak at length. Their lightbulb moment came over a meal. Even though they had felt something quite exceptional early on and never made the connection.

Mary and Cleopas race back to Jerusalem. They find that four people, now including Peter, have seen the risen Jesus alive and fitter than ever. We don't know how many were there that night, though we can make an intelligent guess. Ten of the core last supper group. Judas was dead and Thomas was off somewhere else. Perhaps 15. maybe a few more. Only one of the core group claims to have seen Jesus, Peter And his credibility isn't so great. We don't know how much the opinions of the others counted. There must have been a whole range of opinions among the rest. Some hoping it was true. Others thinking that grief had sent their friends mad.

I like to think that Matthew is reminding them that they should expect experiences like Mary's and Peter's and the Cleopases. He's the only one who we know he made a note of what Jesus had said when they were back in Galilee. He tries to make them pay attention. Its making sense now. Jesus said: If two or three were gathered he would be among them— so it's true Jesus still here with us in some psychic sense. It's just psychology. It makes a bit more sense of what happened next because when Jesus appeared the majority reaction was not, somebody must have left a window open but It's a ghost, even though those who had seen him earlier had met the kind of person you would invite in for dinner, somebody who was a professional gardener tanned and muscular certainly not an apparition, grey and bloodless Not the best of support groups to come to having to prove he had a body, showing his wounds, and proving he could eat baked fish.

So we feel for this bipolar crowd. One minute they are down and Jesus has to say 'Peace' the next they are high as kites and he has to say 'Peace' and give them some key points about the Spirit for the future. But how do we work with the story. The idea that Matthew might have made a connection to the 'gathered in my name' episode isn't total fantasy. I'm riffing off something John says about that evening and on the following week when Thomas, the resurrection denier and general party pooper, is there. John says that Jesus stood among them—in the middle, just like Matthew notes. If it wasn't for the unprecedented circumstances Its hardly worth commenting on. 'Among' 'middle'— just ordinary common words in Greek as well as English, but given that they were shocked, frightened and alone—even when they were together behind barred and bolted doors—it's worth thinking about. Most of us know what it's like to know that Jesus is with us when we are on our own and at least on occasion we are aware of him being among us when we meet— his closeness might give us that burning heart sensation, make us warm and comfortable, or unusually chilled.

But what about in our new world. The last couple of weeks we've talked about knowing Jesus is with us, by our side. My take is that knowing he is among us—standing between us is going to require a step up to another level. Hands up. When I'm watching something on my own on Youtube that feeds my faith I can sometimes feel the Spirit come close—even more than when I'm in a real life event. Facetime/Skype/Zoom not so much. Its not you guys but looking at all your faces, is weird.

Video chat must be covered by Jesus's all-time statement as well as cathedral, village hall and small groups hiding in basements. I am finding that practising the presence on my own is mainly a matter of paying attention, but then I've had lots of practice, I've a study where I can shut the door and crank the music up and I don't have kids who need someone to interact with all the time. Being aware of Jesus among us is a different matter. I know that Rosie has got a connection from Morning Prayer, and I've found my attention caught on Desert Days and more recently, on Dayspring Whatsapp, by artwork from Philippa's journal and I've had some good phone calls. Zoom not so much. But I do believe that if we gather in his name, Jesus is there in a special way and I want to press the off button knowing Jesus has been in the middle somewhere between your kitchen table and my front room. If that's a goal for you too it would be great to get some chat going, to build faith and focus.

And if you are struggling to be aware of the Spirit, do call or message someone. Knowing God's closeness, at least some of the time is a gift with your name on waiting to be unwrapped and we'd be honoured to walk with you to your Emmaus or wait together for the Spirit to come again to your virtual upper room.