

# RECOGNISING JESUS IN THE NEW NORMAL

- **Restating** the fact of God's closeness
- **Looking for** signs of Jesus presence in different spaces
- **Listening for** the sound of his voice when your vision is impaired
- **Valuing** small signs of presence
- **Expecting** him to stand among us when we are digitally together
- **Taking time**, if you're slow on the uptake like most of Jesus's inner circle
- **Helping others** to give a name to the closeness and support that they feel
- **Praying for** a new Pentecost for a 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 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.

**Takeaway #1.** 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.

## 2. CLEOPAS & MARY

### **Luke 24:13-35.**

A few hours after Mary met Jesus in the garden, Cleopas goes to Emmaus, probably with his wife Mary. Let's call her Mary # 2 just for a moment. Mary # 2 was in fact with Mary # 1 in the garden on Easter morning and met at least one angel. They are both in the group watching as Jesus dies, and when his body is carried to the tomb. Front and centre of the events as they unfold. On top of all that trauma Mary and Cleopas have two boys—James and Joseph—who are Jesus's disciples. The whole family is tied up in the unprecedented changes.

Mary and Cleopas walk along, talking about the news; trying to make sense of it. Jesus catches up and joins in with the conversation. Now just like in the garden, He is unrecognised but this time he doesn't help. In fact, Jesus gives the impression that he knows nothing about what's been going on. They are amazed. 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days.' (24:18) (You must have had your social switched off.)

So, they explain all about Jesus to this stranger who quite clearly has been completely out of it, how in just a week everything has gone crazy. Eventually they get it out of their systems and Jesus has his turn to analyse all that had happened. Just like Mary # 1, they don't recognise him. Unlike Mary, they fail to identify his voice or even work out who he is when they talk together for some hours. It's no wonder that Jesus sounds a little bit irritated with them.

Anyway. Change of scene. Jesus is invited in for the night, and as guest he gets to say grace and pass the food around. When he does so, it's like flicking a switch for Mary and her husband. But Jesus disappears. 'That's why it was like our hearts burning when he talked to us'. A lightbulb moment. Get this. In unprecedented and worrying circumstances it was possible for Mary who had seen an angel, even if her husband hadn't, to talk with Jesus for ages, feel unusual warmth as

she did so, but not make the link until they connect with him over a meal. They already knew Jesus but in our world that's less and less often the case.

Take the example of Susan. When I met her she had just prepared, cooked and cleared up lunch for 40 people at a drop-in. Almost the first thing she told me was that as a child, she had an invisible friend and as an adult the friend had become a comforting presence and source of wisdom. On and off she had gone to church to keep her mother-in-law company but that's as far as it went. When she had a daughter of her own, she joined a parent and toddler group connected with the drop in. And when her daughter was a lot older, she was eventually persuaded to take the catering job. It was over some months, probably a year or two, that by chatting to people and then exploring Christianity more carefully for herself she was able to name her invisible friend, the comforting presence that had stayed with her into adulthood. It gradually dawned on Susan that it was Jesus who had been supporting her for more than 40 years.

Final story. Paul the apostle is in Athens, the Oxford and Cambridge of its day. It's about 25 years after the first Easter and Paul tells the story to this new audience. Then he talks about how people can connect with God. It's not just by accepting the resurrection as fact. It is as much about feelings. He explains God isn't far away. Finding him is a matter of feeling—groping around. And get this. The period you live in makes a difference. (Acts 17:26-27)

The implication of what Paul had to say is that unprecedented times may affect people's sensitivity to God. It took a while for Susan, more like a gradual dawning than flicking a switch, and she needed help to put a name to that presence Mary and Cleopas needed something more to give the presence a name. In Athens they were definitely groping. They had an altar labelled to the unknown God. (17:23) They needed to do less thinking around and more feeling around.

Two things take away this week.

**Takeaway #1.** Even if you've been around Jesus for a while, in all the strangeness do find time to look for small feelings of presence. Make sure you pay attention to nudges that might be God wanting to connect with you. Be relentless in carving out enough space to notice little hints of the Spirit drawing close

**Takeaway #2.** On the basis of Paul's insight in Acts 17, and the buzz we're hearing in the current climate, more people than usual may be aware of comforting presence or sensing a whisper in the dark. If people like us—who know God is not far away—are finding connecting with Jesus and the Spirit more tricky than usual, other people may be in an even more complicated situation. Perhaps they need help in naming the Spirit who is reaching out to them. Maybe you could at least ask if that has been happening and raise the possibility of God with people you know well.

### 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. It's 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 It's 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. It's 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.

**Takeaway #1.** 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.

**Takeaway #2.** 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.

## 4. GOING FISHING

### **John 21:1-14.**

Three weeks after the Easter weekend at least seven of the eleven are together, back home in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go to meet him. This time Thomas has joined the crew. He's learned his lesson and he's not doing his own thing.

Peter suggests that they go fishing and the others agree. Some of these guys had left jobs as commercial fishermen. We know that three years ago Peter had been worried about how it would work out But, he had followed Jesus and Jesus had paid his way. Now that decision was coming back to bite them. Since the night he was arrested Jesus had talked about doing something quite different in the future that doesn't involve them. To make it worse their savings had disappeared with Judas the group treasurer had run off, purse with him and all. So far Jesus hadn't turned up in Galilee and there were bills to be paid. They had to be sensible. With no money and no plan, the new normal was shaping up and it didn't look great.

Hoping to make some money, the best way they knew how, they spend all night fishing and catch nothing. It must have reminded them of their last fishing trip they'd had the same sort of night—a complete waste of time. Three years ago when they got to shore, tired, aching, and fed up, Jesus had asked to use the boat as a stage. At the end of his talk he had told them to throw the net out on the other side. That's how it had all started. 'Don't be afraid', Jesus had said to Peter. From now on you will fish for people. It will be OK.' Great days. Only three years. It must have seemed like a lifetime ago.

As they rowed back through the morning mist. There were no noisy crowds on the beach this time wanting to hear Jesus just one solitary figure camped out beside a fire. 'Hi boys', the man by the fire shouts out. 'You don't have any fish do you?' 'No such luck', they reply. 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' Almost as though they were in a dream, repeating the events of the day that changed their lives three years ago, they throw the net over the side and within seconds are grabbing for the ropes. It is full, too heavy to pull in. John is the quickest thinker among them. 'It's the Lord', he says. Slower to think but quicker to action. Peter is straight over the side. Splashes his way to the shore. Gets to land. I can imagine that Peter is standing there with his mouth open. Trying to make sense of it all. Before his head and his heart explode, Jesus breaks in. Why don't you bring some of the fish you've just caught?

Peter nods, realises from the grunting behind him what's happening and goes back to help land the catch 153 fish large ones. Somebody counted them. Enough to sell and start a new business.

That breakfast was full of awkward silences. None of the disciples dared ask him if he was the Lord. Nobody had the nerve to ask where the barbecue had come from. Perhaps there had been some kid going past who had offered his lunch to Jesus. (There are only two food stories recorded by John. This one and that one.) They were also embarrassed that they remembered that last time they had had a catch like that, they had pulled their boats up on shore left everything and followed the guy who was now raking the coal and handing out the bread.

So, from the unprecedented of the Easter season to our unheard-of experiences in 2020. You've probably been joining the dots. Were the disciples getting there or not? John says it was the third time that Jesus appeared to them and they were still struggling to recognise him in the new environment.

Three takeaways—enough to keep you going for a day or two.

**Takeaway #1.** In unprecedented circumstances, Jesus looks different even when you're out of lockdown and are beginning to get your head on. When the new normal is anything but normal, it takes time and repeat experiences to discern the Spirit

**Takeaway #2.** A Galilean bonus. When we add the last page of Matthew's record to John's we can see that Jesus had planned two key appointments A few days later they meet him on a Galilean hillside like the one that Jesus had prayed and then chose the twelve to be with him and to send him out to preach. This time he was sending them out for good with the promise that for sure he would always be with them. As you think about what's next don't hope too much for a return to the old normality. People are talking about taking a virtual holiday. Take yours back to the beach where Jesus first said to you follow me. Revisit your mountainside where he drew you in as a friend and gave you your first job. What's your great commission in our anxious world?

**Takeaway #3.** I'm pretty sure after doing something sensible with the miracle financial bonus, Thomas, Peter and the rest took a big step up. A few weeks later Peter was saying 'I've got no money, but I've got something better. Why don't you stand up and walk?' For our unstable new normal we need to be aware of God in new places, and we need fresh resources too. Get waiting guys. Tell yourselves: Pentecost is round the corner. The Spirit will fill us with the power we need.

## 5. THOMAS

### John 20:24-29

We've done four sessions about recognising Jesus in the new normal of the first Easter and in our unprecedented circumstances too.

Thomas was missing from the lockdown gathering on Easter evening following the unprecedented experiences of the 72 hours before. Don't ask 'Why?' He probably thought it was safer to shelter on his own. Thomas seems to have been a law unto himself, a sort of Eeyore character but assertive with it; so much so that he had got two mentions over the previous couple of weeks in John's story for being a bit outspoken. When Jesus dropped hints about what would happen in Jerusalem. 'Let us also go that we may die with him.' (11:16) At the last supper he was the first one to take on Jesus. 'Lord, we don't know where you're going so how can we know the way.'

(14:5) Explain yourself properly Lord. Thomas was his own person and not intimidated even by Jesus. Just like Eeyore, he could see the dark cloud to every silver lining.

So, when the others catch up with Thomas during the week and tell him all about the latest developments, he comes out as a resurrection denier. He rejects their evidence. 'Unless I see the scars of the nails and poke my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' (20:25) He was a bit of a party pooper: a wet blanket. Actually, he was bit arrogant too. Thomas thought he had higher standards than the rest of his gullible friends. Whether it was his personality, the fact he had not been with the group and felt sore that he had missed out on the amazing experience they had shared, or the sheer difficulty of getting his head round the fact that having had things initially turn out as badly as he expected there was now a complete reversal and he had to find a place to hope again. It was probably a mix of all three.

Eventually, a week later the disciples are still under lockdown. It's a repeat of the week before except that this time Thomas is with them. Jesus comes into a locked room, just like the previous Sunday. And stands among them, just like the previous Sunday. Jesus says, 'Peace be with you,' just like the previous Sunday. And standing among them, his reality felt by everybody there, he focuses on Thomas and holds out his hands. '[Poke] your finger in my wounds. Stop doubting and believe.' In the event, Thomas didn't need to touch. Looking was more than enough for him to commit completely to Jesus. 'My Lord and My God!' The last thing Jesus says to Thomas is the punchline of the piece: 'Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

There's a lot going on here.

- **First** believing is so much more than ticking a box—that a man who was dead came back to life. Believing is a complete commitment
- **Second** We know that working out exactly what Blessed means is not easy.—Lets stay with somewhere around 'Well Done'. There's a special prize for those who haven't seen and yet have believed.
- **Thirdly** this thing of seeing works on a couple of levels.

Luke tells us that when Jesus joins the inner circle in the locked room they **see** a ghost. Mary meets Jesus and **sees** a gardener. The Cleopases meet a traveller and need several nudges to flick the switch and **see**. Now the special prize for believing without seeing wasn't a totally new thought. The same day that Thomas looks on the bright side of life and says 'Let's die with him,' just before Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, he says to Martha, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' (11:46). So there's a thing. Seeing then believing works, though only for people who are open hearted. But believing leads to seeing, too. For people like Martha in chapter 11 and Nathaniel in chapter 1:49, and everybody who lives by faith, not by what is physically obvious (2 Corinthians 5:7), the special prize (the blessing) is **believing then seeing**. As we believe, in a 'my Lord and my God' way, we see more, both by our outer eye and our inner sight, and so we believe more. John has a big thing about spiritual seeing. It's the reveal, God pulling the curtain back. For him it includes other kinds of spiritual awareness: feeling, knowing, hearing.

In trying to get a shape to recognising Jesus in an emerging new normal, we've seen some great pointers around the unprecedented circumstances of Easter.

- Coming back to the **fact** of God's promised closeness.
- Looking for signs of Jesus presence in different spaces
- Expecting him to stand among us, when we are digitally together and not depending on sitting in the same room for that to occur
- Getting there takes time, if you're slow on the uptake like some of us and most of Jesus's inner circle
- When you do there are others that need help to name the closeness and support that they feel
- We've highlighted the obvious conclusion that we need new resources for our new normal that points to Pentecost.

There's a lot going on here. And it looks like it's going to be a while before we go back to our old familiar ways of meeting together and praying together. We are desperate to see the end to so much grief and loss. We want people to get their jobs back and to be able to hug again. But we could make the most of the situation we're in by paying attention to recognising Jesus in new ways and by helping others put a name to the Spirit they are sensing as well.