

## **“The Wavelength of Love”**

**Luke 24:36b-48**  
***Third Sunday of Easter; April 18, 2021***

Here’s one of the most awkward moments life can present, more so now during a pandemic. Maybe you can identify with it. Ready?

You’re out in public and all of a sudden someone comes up to you, greets you by name, moves in closer, and begins asking you questions. “How’s your family,” the person asks. “How many years has it been?” You have no idea who this person is. You can’t recall the name. The COVID mask covering half their face makes it really hard. You’re baffled and confused.

Your best hope is to turn the tables and quickly start asking questions of your own: “Well, how are *you*?” “Tell me about your family.” Such questions are asked in the hope that those answers will spark some lopsided neuron in your brain to fire off and give you some help in identifying this friendly stranger. Sometimes stalling works. But more often it doesn’t. Then what?

The best you can hope for is to escape before your blatant ignorance is revealed. Worst case scenario? Your “friend” is offended, crestfallen that his or her existence has been wiped from your memory bank. It’s a situation that all the apologies in the world will never change. It’s especially bad when this happens to clergy. It’s like those dreams where you realize you’re standing in front of a crowd in your underwear. It’s a moment of excruciating embarrassment.

The only “upside” of such encounters is that they put us in familiar company. We can relate. This is the same situation as Jesus’s first disciples. In every case when the newly resurrected Jesus appeared to his closest, most beloved followers — they unfailingly got it wrong. They didn’t recognize him, 100% of the time. Two weeks ago we heard the resurrection story from John’s gospel when Mary Magdalene perceived Jesus as a gardener. Another familiar resurrection story from Luke’s gospel tells about two disciples traveling all the way to Emmaus with Jesus. “Their eyes, though, were prevented from recognizing him.”

And now Luke tells another story of when Jesus’s followers were gathered and suddenly “Jesus himself stood in the midst of them.” Even though these disciples had heard the testimony from the Emmaus road travelers, a testimony that proclaimed, “The Lord really has been raised,” they still failed to recognize Jesus in their midst. This, indeed, is how they responded: “They were terrified and alarmed, thought that they were seeing a ghost.”

It’s not just that they didn’t recognize their Lord and Master. They immediately assumed their visitor was some sort of ghostly apparition, maybe with diabolical intentions. This is the same kind of failed recognition that’s recorded in yet another gospel, Matthew 14:26, as Jesus walked on water toward the boat that held his closest companions.

At least Mary and the Emmaus travelers greeted the unrecognized Jesus with some decorum. They spoke with civility to the stranger before them. In Luke 24:37 the disciples were just plain panicked. But unlike that unrecognized friend in the produce aisle at the grocery store or in front of Rise-N-Dine, Jesus treated his disciples’s failure with gentleness. “Why do these questionings come up in your hearts?” he asked.

To alleviate their fears, Jesus approached his disciples at the most basic human level: the physical. The evidence Jesus offered to them to prove that he was himself is that “he showed them his hands and his feet.” In other words, Jesus showed them the signs of his crucifixion. That evidence “proved” he was their Lord, their friend who had been executed by the Romans. Jesus then asked for something to eat and proceeded to chow down on some nice

baked fish that his stunned disciples managed to offer to him. Mastication and digestion “proved” that he was in fact alive, not some “ghostly” apparition. Even as Jesus’s identity had been fully revealed to the Emmaus Road travelers — as they sat together at table, broke bread together, and saw his wounds — so Jesus was finally seen and recognized by his disciples when he joined in sharing food together with them after showing his wounds.

Why was it so hard for those who knew Jesus the best in human form to recognize him later in resurrection form? How could he not be a familiar face? There may be lots of reasons. Perhaps most basically, Jesus didn’t appear where his disciples expected to see him. Before his appearance to her, Mary Magdalene was only looking for Jesus’s dead body in the tomb. Despite having heard Jesus’s preaching on the Messiah’s death and ultimate resurrection, Mary could only envision Jesus with one “face” — that of a lifeless corpse.

The Emmaus travelers had heard the story of the empty tomb and the tales of resurrection sightings but never dreamed such a wondrous miracle as the risen Messiah could possibly be encountered walking along a dusty road between Jerusalem and the little no-count village of Emmaus.

The disciples in today’s story, fearfully huddled in Jerusalem, surely didn’t expect Jesus to just “show up” in their rented room. If the stories they were hearing were true, then obviously a risen Messiah, one who had broken the power of death, would return to them with power and might, proclaiming his identity, perhaps even waving a sword of triumph. How could the risen Lord simply stroll into their midst and greet them with the traditional “Peace be with you” . . . as if nothing was new?

The problem that Jesus’s first disciples had in recognizing their Master and Lord is the same problem that plagues Jesus’s twenty-first century disciples: disciple you and disciple me. We keep looking for Jesus in all the wrong places.

We look for Jesus in places we separate out from mundane, ordinary life and call those places “holy,” or “sacred.” We look for Jesus among the professional elites, the powerful people, the movers and the shakers, perhaps in the Vatican or the mega-church down the road. We look for Jesus among those we perceive as specially gifted, the miraculously touched or the sanctified saintly. Surely those are the ones who will most clearly reflect the presence of Jesus the Messiah in our midst.

Like those 1st century disciples, we 21st century disciples fail to look around and even look down, around, or even under our noses. To find Jesus’s presence, we assume Jesus would never be found in common lodgings among common people. Or that the presence of Jesus would never be found wandering on streets lined with the homeless, the mentally ill, and the drug dependent. Surely the presence of the Lord could never be down on the southern border with illegal immigrants and refugees. We expect Jesus to appear among the upper crust, not the down-and-outs. We look for Jesus in the cream of the crop, not the skimmed milk of the earth or the sour dregs at the bottom of the cup.

Part of our failure to recognize Jesus may be a “brain problem.” Snuggled between the two hemispheres of our brain there’s a region known as the amygdala, which is part of the limbic brain, the region where some of the most basic responses to stimuli are situated. The amygdala doesn’t like “different.” When we encounter someone or something that’s noticeably “different,” the amygdala gets jumpy and sends out messages encouraging us to be wary, keep our distance, even just plain run. Dr. Franklin can give you the medical jargon about this.

This primitive defense mechanism against anyone or anything that is “not us” may have served our nomadic ancestors well. But it causes obvious problems in the inter-racial, multi-ethnic, complex global societies we live in today. Amygdala responses in the brain might be at the source of racism and ethnic clashes — that and the sickness of the human soul. “Black Lives Matter” wouldn’t be a “thing” today if white Christians had consulted Jesus a bit more seriously about race and power. So maybe we should move on from “looking” for Jesus and instead try “listening” for his presence.

But our problem still is that we’re only “tuned in” to finding Jesus in the places and among the people that we deem “acceptable” or “appropriate” — you know, enlightened people like us with similar opinions and beliefs. We need to re-tune, to adjust our alignment, in order to find and recognize Jesus’s presence. We need a Holy Spirit upgrade from a “worldly wavelength” to the “love wavelength,” because that’s where we find Jesus.

I will always have a snarky grudge against Noah. He had plenty of opportunity to swat those two mosquitoes on the ark when he had the chance. Imagine what misery could have been avoided for humanity. Mosquitoes can spread EEE and other deadly diseases. They bite us and cause crazy itchiness. They swarm in our face and food. Worst of all, they know exactly where our ears are. That’s where they like to locate, emitting their insanity-inspiring buzz in the middle of the night. And yet, ironically, mosquitoes can teach us something about changing wavelengths in order to find and greet the one we are looking for.

Have you ever wondered about the real reason mosquitoes buzz? Researchers from the University of Maine did. And so they gathered male and female mosquitos. Finding females wasn’t a problem because it’s only the females that feed on mammal blood. The female mosquitoes are the ones we swat at so desperately. The smaller males are elusive and shy. Researchers then carefully applied a drop of superglue to the thorax of one male and one female skeeter, gluing them to a small pin, but making sure they could still move their wings. That obviously was the source of the “buzz.”

But did you know that every mosquito emits its own distinct sound? Researchers found that each pesky mosquito had a unique frequency. Its wings created a one-of-a-kind pitch. The larger females tended to have a lower wavelength, while the smaller males had a higher pitch.

Researchers then moved male and female mosquitoes closer to each other, while continuing to “listen in” on the buzz their wings were making. As male and female came closer, they slowly began to adjust their individual frequencies so that the combined tone the two mosquitoes created wasn’t a clash but was more like a chord. To show her “affection” (researchers didn’t know how to describe mosquito romance), the female raised her pitch a bit. To show his “affection,” the male lowered his tone slightly until the two love bugs created a new sound, not matching the frequency of the other, but complimenting it, creating a perfect “love duet” of tonality. Who knew such ugly creatures could actually do something kind of beautiful? Too bad they have to ruin it by spawning a bunch of horrible kids.

The hidden harmony of a mosquito’s buzz may be an odd illustration — but you get it, don’t you? Maybe we don’t recognize Jesus because he’s operating on a different frequency than the world. The love frequency resonates with forgiveness, with repentance, with joy. We have to adjust our own frequency, learn to “tune-out” the world’s noise and to “tune-in” the love frequency that Jesus’s presence emits at all times.

What does the love frequency “sound” like? Where is it being played out? And yet again, we find ourselves in the company of the first disciples. “Then Jesus said to them... ‘Everything written about me in the law of Moses, and in the prophets and the Psalms, had to be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds [their brains] to understand the Bible.”

You know as well as I do that when it comes to the spheres of human activity — the creative arts, medicine, law, manufacturing, finance, government, you name it — we can’t put too much stock in existing patterns of behavior or historical trends when planning for anything. Not so when it comes to God, however. The accumulated, iterative nature of God’s interventions in human history — the love that engendered the created world, the generosity that bestowed innumerable descendants upon Abraham, the compassion that liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the faithfulness that brought the beleaguered exiles joyfully home to Jerusalem, the divine love in the fullness of time when God sent us his Son Jesus for us and for our salvation to be citizens of God’s kingdom. All these past acts serve as the basis for our trust in God’s continued goodness toward us. We have experienced God’s benevolent interventions in our own lives as well. These may sometimes occur in heroic ways — the dramatic rescue, the stunning achievement — but most often they come through the medium of human relationship, in the small ordinary acts within family settings, with friends, or colleagues, or even strangers. The homemade Valentine from a child, the moment of deep connection in a telephone conversation with a far-away friend, maybe even the sentence in a sermon that sticks with us and maybe even transforms our perspective (for a few moments, anyway), a smile from a stranger on the street that turns around a bad mood — all these are instances of God’s love and compassion in our lives, if we but open our eyes to see them and tune our ears to hear them.

We don’t go from the sanctuary or even through the door of our home to take Jesus anywhere. Jesus is already out there ahead of you. Your mission and mine this week is to recognize Jesus and what he’s up to in people’s lives so that we can join him in what he’s already doing. Want to find Jesus? Want to join Jesus? Get on the Jesus wavelength — not the wavelength of the world’s principalities and powers and all that hateful, hostile noise. The gospel of Jesus is abuzz with the wavelength of love. This is the wavelength of the Prince of Peace.

I hope that Jesus bugs you and gets under your skin. The prayer of St. Paul from his letter to the Philippians (1:9-11) closes us out — *“...this is what I’m praying: that your love may overflow still more and more, in knowledge and in all astute wisdom. Then you will be able to tell the difference between good and evil, and be sincere and faultless on the day of the Messiah, filled to overflowing with the fruit of right living, fruit that comes through King Jesus to God’s glory and praise.” Amen.*