

Would I Know Jesus If I Saw Him?

Michael Jinkins

The Gospel According to St. Luke 24:13-35

April 26, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Even the somber grey lady of journalism, The New York Times, struggled to keep its composure when, on March 21, 1991, it reported that little Conor Clapton, the four year old son of Rock guitarist Eric Clapton had fallen forty-nine stories from his mother's high-rise condo to his death. A window cleaner had failed to close the floor-to-ceiling window that Conor loved to look out of. The little guy ran past the housekeeper and straight out the window. His daddy was coming over that day to pick him up and take him to the circus, and he could hardly wait. He wanted to watch for his daddy from way up in the skyscraper.

C. S. Lewis, in the memoir he wrote about his own experience of grief, after the death of his wife, Joy, made the observation that grief feels similar to fear.

I can relate to that, because even this week as I returned to the original news story about Conor, a child I didn't know, looking at the picture of that little blond-headed boy, I could feel a lump in my throat and a knot in my gut: sympathetic sadness tinged with terror at the mere possibility of such a loss.

The world is such a dangerous place and nobody gets out of it alive.

Somehow out of his grief, Eric Clapton wrote the first verse of a song unlike anything he had ever written before, "If I see you in heaven." Many of you may know it, but I'll just read that first verse:

"Would you know my name
If I saw you in heaven?
Would it be the same
If I saw you in heaven?
I must be strong and carry on
Cause I know I don't belong here in heaven."

(Eric Clapton and Will Jennings)

I can remember once being so smart and theologically sophisticated that this song would have sounded like sentimental tripe to me. But someplace along the way I became less smart and lost my theological sophistication, because when I hear this song now it doesn't make me want to do intellectual cartwheels around the room, it makes me want to hold those I love a little closer. And it awakens within me that feeling the old Book of Common Worship speaks of in its incomparable Memorial Service: *"We give you thanks, O God, that you have placed deep in the human heart an unquenchable trust that life does not end in death."*

We live in the long afternoon of Easter Sunday. Behind us lie the stories of a miracle and before us the simple facts of life and death.

And today's story is especially relevant, because it is about a couple of Jesus' disciples meeting the risen Christ while walking along a country road, and they don't know his name, they don't recognize him. This story may speak more directly to our grief, our fear, and our hope than any other resurrection story, because it is literally so pedestrian.

This passage, often referred to as "the road to Emmaus story," seems to me to be one of the most peculiar passages of Scripture in the New Testament. People who have known and followed Jesus for years meet him on a road, walk with him, and talk to him for quite awhile, and they don't know him.

This isn't like bumping into your child's third grade teacher in the grocery store a few weeks into the beginning of a new school year, vaguely noticing a resemblance to someone you ought to know as they pass you in the produce section. This is something else entirely.

The "road to Emmaus story" is in Luke. In John's Gospel we encounter other instances when the disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus. Mary Magdalene, at the empty tomb, mistakes Jesus for a gardener. On the seashore, none of the disciples recognize Jesus until he directs them where they can catch fish; and then again, the disciples don't know him until he sits down to share a meal with them.

Something is being communicated to us in these gospel stories. During his life, the men and women who walked daily with Jesus had no trouble recognizing him. But after his death and resurrection, they don't know him.

What are the gospels trying to tell us? I wonder.

The first thing I have to say to you is: I don't know.

I just don't know why the post-resurrection identity of Jesus was veiled from those who knew him so well. But I have a hunch or two. And I hope my hunches may be helpful.

My first hunch is this. I am relatively sure that if we knew we were dealing with Jesus, we'd want to make a really good impression on him, we'd do our level best to impress him. We might call this the ethical hunch.

Jesus said, "*If you have done it unto the least of these you have done it unto me.*" In one of his most memorable and worrying stories, he warns us that the indelible sign that we belong to him is that we have compassion for him in this present world. Jesus warns us that there will be many who will call out, "Lord, Lord," whom he doesn't know.

And, what is even more unnerving is this: those people who in this present life do serve Jesus with compassion and care don't recognize him when they are serving him.

Does it even matter that we know Jesus? Maybe not. But it does matter if Jesus knows us.

What seems to matter is that we treat other people, especially the least of these, as though they are Jesus. Not because he may be watching, but because he is present in them. My old friend, Ted Wardlaw, calls this the Pizza Guy Principle. You don't discover someone's character by observing how well they treat the powerful or those who can benefit them most, but how they treat the kid who delivers their pizza.

The second hunch about what this text means is this: the biblical writers may be signaling to us that the stories of the resurrection are taking us way beyond where our minds and our imaginations and our experience can take us. What is familiar to us breaks down at this boundary.

I hope this doesn't sound trite, in this context, but one of my favorite movies is "Men in Black," with Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith. And there's this moment when the old agent (Jones) is recruiting the young agent (Smith), and the new guy wants the old guy to recognize that although he's young he has the talent and the experience that the Men in Black need.

They're riding down in the elevator at Men in Black Headquarters when the young agent says all this. And then the elevator doors open, and the new agent is greeted with a huge room full of unimaginably weird creatures from galaxies and dimensions previously unknown to him. And the old agent says: okay Slick, as of now, your experience is worth exactly nothing.

Maybe that's what these resurrection stories are telling us. But there's something else in these stories too.

We don't know how, but somehow love passes through that boundary beyond which our minds cannot conceive. In every story of the unrecognized risen Jesus there comes a moment when the clouds of unknowing part, and recognition is rekindled. And then they recognize him. It's like a fire being lit in a cold dark room. Their Lord and friend is present.

I cannot pretend to know what all of this means. Nor do I understand what St. Paul is getting at when he says, "*Behold I tell you a mystery, in the twinkling of an eye we shall all be changed.*" But this I do believe, at the core of Ultimate Being there beats a heart of love. And that love will hold us forever.

Amen.