One of the details that always puzzles us when we read this story is why Mary, such a close friend and disciple of Jesus, wouldn’t recognize him. Didn’t she know what he looked like? Was he wearing some sort of mask? St. John doesn’t elaborate, but he’s not the only one to mention such a detail. St. Luke, in his telling of the Easter story, relates how Cleopas and his companion, on the way to Emmaus, were accompanied by Jesus for 7 miles without recognizing him.

I don’t know why Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus, but I have a guess. I wonder if she looked up and saw her old teacher standing there, but thought that her eyes were playing tricks on her in the half-light of dawn. After all, how could it be Jesus standing there? Hadn’t she just seen him suffocate on the cross? Didn’t she see with her own eyes the blood and water that poured from his side when the soldier pierced him with his spear?

I wonder if Mary was so sure of what she had seen that she didn’t trust what she did see. I wonder if she saw her old teacher standing there and knew it couldn’t be true, and that certainty blinded her to the truth. I think this may be true because when he calls her name and she recognizes him, she does something to him that causes him to say, “Don’t hold onto me.” If it were me, I would have immediately rushed over to hold him in an embrace. She is so astounded and relieved to see her old teacher inexplicably alive, that she doesn’t see that he is not her old teacher; at least, not anymore. It’s Jesus, alright, the same Jesus who taught and healed in her midst, who died on the cross, but he isn’t what he used to be. He’s been raised from the dead. She sees his old life, but the life he has now is new.

One thing we know from the gospels is that once Jesus rose from the dead, everything didn’t go back to the way it was. Nobody was the same as they were before. Before, Jesus was the teacher, the twelve were disciples, and everything they did was headed towards Jerusalem. Now, everything has changed: Jesus is no longer a teacher, but a brother. The twelve are no longer disciples, but apostles. And rather than everything pointing to Jerusalem, everything is pointing away from Jerusalem out into the wider world. Easter doesn’t make everything go back to normal; Easter introduces a new normal.

That is why Easter is still good news for us. If Easter were all about restoring what was, we would have no need of it in a world that is so radically different than the one on which Jesus laid his eyes that Sunday morning. We need an Easter that carries the promise of what is new, not what is old.

In this time in which we find ourselves now, our world is being changed. Things as we knew have been turned upside down and sideways. We sometimes dare to hope for a time when things will go “back to normal” but the reality is that they won’t go “back to normal;” there is only the new normal that is coming.

On Good Friday, we experienced the death of the old normal, the old way of seeing and doing. In the world of Good Friday, we could find the singular cause of all our problems and eliminate it. We could appeal to the power of the Empire to keep us safe and protected. But Good Friday shows us that these things are not true.

In this crazy, upside-down world, we know that we can’t just pin our problems on a single scapegoat—an unpopular political figure or a malfunctioning system or a particularly infectious virus may all be real problems, but none of them is the single cause of all our ills. Good Friday forces us to confront the fact that we are so often our own worst enemy, that we are so frequently the voices in the crowd shouting “Crucify!” Good Friday is the death of our concept of what is normal.

And aren’t we already finding that what we considered normal was not actually very healthy? This pandemic has, among other things, caused the air to clear. It has brought many of us free time we didn’t know we were missing, and opportunities to bond with our families. It has also shown us that many things we thought were necessary or “essential” are not, and many things that we took for granted are, in fact, far more important than we could ever have dreamed.

In the midst of Easter, our first inclination can be to think about all the things we will lose, all the things we will miss. We will miss having the freedom to travel like we once did, or to go out in public without worrying about contracting an illness. We will miss the local restaurants and the small businesses that will go under. We will mourn the dead. Like Mary, we think only of our teacher who has died, and we are blind to the possibilities. We can’t see that the being before our eyes is not the old familiar we are used to, but something new, something the world has never seen before.

What will our new world look like? What possibilities will it hold? Maybe we’ll finally recognize how fragile our existence is and really step up to take care of the planet that nurtures us and makes our lives possible. Perhaps we’ll come to realize how much we depend upon other people and be more ready to forgive and accept rather than politicize and polarize. Hopefully we’ll continue reaching out to one another and caring for one another as we are learning to do in this. Maybe we’ll think of all we’ve had to do without and be content with fewer things and search instead to fill our lives with meaning through service and compassion rather than leisure and possessions.

This is resurrection. Resurrection does not deny death or the pain it brings, but it does balance that pain with hope: hope that God is still at work bringing life out of death, promise out of ruin, creation out of destruction. To quote Frederick Buechner: “Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing.”

In the midst of all that has been shaken up and all that has been or will be lost, the promise of Easter invites us to look ahead with hope, to embrace the pain and the grief of this time knowing that where we go from here is filled with God’s possibility for a far greater joy.

Perhaps another reason that we are told Mary didn’t recognize Jesus in the garden is that, in this new normal, Jesus never looks like we thought we remembered him to look. Perhaps another promise of Easter is that, even now, we can still find him, walking among us, though we seldom recognize him.

As we celebrate this truly strange Easter morning, God is inviting us to take a second look at that gardener, to be aware of the places where our risen Savior might show up. It could be in the faces of strangers, or even people we know well—people lending a helping hand to neighbors in need, or putting themselves in harm’s way for the sake of keeping society functioning or keeping the vulnerable well. It could be that we suddenly recognize that Jesus has been with us always in the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, just as he always said he would be.

Today is our day to stare death in the face and to see hope. It is our invitation to run back to the upper room with this news: Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]; to be the bearers of unbelievable and inappropriate joy to a world still lost in grief.

We are not out of the woods yet. The promise of life and joy without end still eludes us, but we do have this promise: the promise of a stone rolled back, linen wrappings lying in an empty tomb, and a figure in the garden, calling us by name. Perhaps, in addition to our Lord, we may also begin to see that this garden is a new beginning, a new Genesis.

In this new beginning is the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, and through him all things came into being… That Word became flesh and lived among us, and gives us the power to become children of God, born not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of a man, but of God. We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. Perhaps in this new beginning, we will be able to move forward with the grace and truth we had been lacking before, the grace and truth that only Jesus can give.

As we search for our new normal, as we find our way in this new world that is even now coming to birth, we do so seeing by the light of the Living Word of God. Christ is risen [Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!], and the light of Christ guides us in the dark, revealing the obstacles that stand in our way and the glory of the God who created us. That light shines in the darkness, and no darkness can overcome it--not the darkness of polluted skies or hardened hearts or the coronavirus, not even the darkness of the grave itself.