

## Found

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, April 21, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 24:36-43](#) and [John 14:18-28](#)

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We're mixing together Luke and John today. That's always a little dicey, talking about two different gospels in one sermon. Each gospel writer wrote from a different context and each gospel writer had favorite stories and their own point of view. So we need to be careful when talking about two readings that are from different gospels. I'll do our best.

Let's start with the Luke passage we shared at the beginning of worship. Though this may seem a strange way to explore this resurrection story, I'll ask the question anyway: Have you ever seen a video of what happens when you put a cucumber behind a cat? These videos made the rounds on social media maybe eight years ago or so. Lots of people filmed their cats after they snuck up on them and quietly placed a cucumber behind them, typically while they were eating. Here are a couple examples.

<https://youtu.be/RBrZsgy4-SQ>

Confession time: I admit to finding these videos to be funny. I also find them to be cruel. I don't know that there's a definitive explanation of why the cats freak out when they turn around and see a cucumber. One explanation that seems to get a fair amount of traction is that the cucumber looks enough like a snake that it triggers a protective, evolutionary reflex in the cats. The other explanation is that it is simply surprising.

A lot has already happened in the 24th chapter of Luke's gospel. Women found the tomb where Jesus was buried empty when they went there early that morning and two men in dazzling white (typically understood to be angels) told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Peter confirmed their story about the empty tomb (though there were no angels there by the time he got to the tomb). Two disciples who had left Jerusalem met Jesus on the way to Emmaus and finally recognized him as their resurrected Lord when he broke the bread with them. Those two (who weren't among the inner circle of the 12 disciples) ran all the way back to Jerusalem that evening and tell the 11 (the 12, minus Judas Iscariot). And now, while they're talking about what happened, Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Their reaction was not one of peace. Their reaction was much more like a cat's when a cucumber is placed behind it. What are they seeing? Is it a ghost? You might remember that in one of John's resurrection stories, Jesus gets inside to where the disciples are hiding – *even though the doors were locked*. Luke seems to be addressing this exact concern.

"Touch me and see," Jesus says, directly addressing their fears and doubts that, rather than a resurrected Jesus, they were actually seeing a ghost. "... for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Luke frames Jesus' act of showing his wounds as not only an act of demonstrating who he is (as in, "look, I'm the one you saw crucified") but also an act of demonstrating his physicality (as in, "look, I'm a human being, not an ethereal spirit").

Jesus asks them if they have anything to eat, and this, too, seems to be a “ghosts don’t eat broiled fish” proof that the resurrected Jesus isn’t a ghost. I think something else might be going on here. Some early Jesus-follower communities celebrated communion with bread and wine – *and fish*. Just as Jesus breaking the bread in the Emmaus story helped the disciples recognize the resurrected Christ in their midst, the disciples giving Jesus some broiled fish *might* (and I stress *might*) be a nod to communion. The other thing that could be going on here is simply the importance of eating together.

Dr. Marcia McFee points out, “Meals are one of the best ways to be with people. Something about sitting down together and eating just loosens up the things that might keep us from interacting and connecting with our neighbor. I don’t think it is an accident that our most important ritual and sacrament is in itself a meal.”<sup>1</sup> Eating together has the power to help us reach across the divide of loneliness so many people feel.

I know that some of the loneliest I’ve ever felt was when someone I deeply loved died. When my mother died, I was living alone in a big apartment complex in Martinez. I was surrounded by lots of people, and they were all people I didn’t know. I had never taken the time to introduce myself to them and they had never taken the time to introduce themselves to me.

Her death wasn’t a surprise. She had had cancer and been through a year of chemotherapy that was awful. When the cancer grew back, she decided not to go through the treatment again. And then one morning, she died. And I didn’t know the people around me and so I couldn’t turn to them for support.

Thankfully, I had a friend in Berkeley and I called him, I think more to say the words out loud – “my mother died” – than for any other reason. He came over. He dropped whatever it was he was doing and came to my apartment, just so I wouldn’t be alone. He got me to change the flight I had already booked so I could fly back east the next day, while he cleaned some dishes that had accumulated in the kitchen sink. He made sure I ate – and that I didn’t have to eat alone. He got me through that first day.

I was in high school when my grandfather died. All these years later what I most distinctly remember is eating dinner in my grandparents’ home. The six from my family, my aunt and cousin, my grandmother, and my grandparents’ pastor gathered around a table. I remember neither getting to Pennsylvania, nor getting back home. I don’t remember how long we were there. I don’t remember where we stayed. The only other snippet of the trip I remember is of being impressed by the pastor’s sermon, that he seemed to actually know my grandfather. Other than that, the one thing I remember is eating together.

“Do you have something to eat?” the resurrected Jesus asked the disciples. Could he have been helping them simply be with each other in a way they didn’t know they needed. They were in each other’s presence, there in their room. But were they really in each other’s company? It is so easy to be in a crowd and still feel alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia McFee in her “Sermon Fodder” for this Sunday in the worship series *Resurrection Stories: Unlock Yours*, published on <https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/>.

A year ago, the Surgeon General wrote an opinion piece published in *The New York Times* about loneliness.<sup>2</sup> He wrote, “At any moment, about one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans. Sometimes loneliness is set off by the loss of a loved one or a job, a move to a new city, or health or financial difficulties – or a once-in-a-century pandemic.

“Other times, it’s hard to know how it arose but it’s simply there. One thing is clear: Nearly everyone experiences it at some point. But its invisibility is part of what makes it so insidious. We need to acknowledge the loneliness and isolation that millions are experiencing and the grave consequences for our mental health, physical health and collective well-being.”

Interestingly there isn’t uniformity of loneliness across demographic groups. For instance, a study commissioned by the insurance company Cigna found that young adults (18-24) are nearly twice as likely as seniors (66 and older) to experience loneliness.<sup>3</sup> Still, there’s a darn good chance that between a quarter and half of us gathered here today, whether we’re gathered on site or on line, are experiencing some level of loneliness. Even though we managed to get up and get dressed, even though we are in a group with a common purpose, a big portion of us are experiencing a measurable level of loneliness right now.

The consequences of the “epidemic of loneliness” reach far beyond the individual. “When we are less invested in one another,” Murthy wrote, “we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone – from climate change and gun violence to economic inequality and future pandemics.” He says that addressing loneliness requires “reorienting ourselves, our communities, and our institutions to prioritize human connection and healthy relationships. The good news is we know how to do this.”

Dr. Murthy says there are three areas that need our attention. First, we need to strengthen social infrastructure. He’s talking about the programs, policies, and structures that aid in the development of healthy relationships. This needs to happen in our schools, in our workplaces, in our community programs and institutions, and in our faith communities. Really, any place where people come together.

Second, we need to change our habits and uses of technology. This means doing things like putting down our phones so we can be more present with one another. It also “means choosing not to take part in online dialogues that amplify judgment and hate instead of understanding.”

Third, we need take steps in our personal lives to rebuild our connections with one another. Murthy says that “small steps can make a big difference.... It could be [as simple as]

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<sup>2</sup> Vivek H. Murthy, “Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It’s Time to Fix That.” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html> (posted 30 April 2023; accessed 20 April 2024).

<sup>3</sup> “The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults,” *The Cigna Group*, <https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look> (based on the study dates, I assume this was posted in early 2023; accessed 20 April 2024).

spending 15 minutes each day to reach out to people we care about, introducing ourselves to our neighbors, checking on co-workers who may be having a hard time, sitting down with people with different views to get to know and understand them, and seeking opportunities to serve others, recognizing that helping people is one of the most powerful antidotes to loneliness.”

While I agree with Murthy that reaching out to others is a great way to decrease loneliness, if you’re the lonely person, that can be hard to do. Though I don’t know if there’s science to back up this claim, I suspect that depression and loneliness dance together. When one is dealing with clinical depression, simply getting out of bed can be a victory and, once accomplished, there just isn’t anything left to be the one doing the reaching out. Similarly, loneliness untreated can, I deeply suspect, lead to depression. Likewise, it can be hard to reach out when one is dealing with other health concerns or disabilities. It’s hard to get to the neighborhood senior center if one has had to give up driving, and being around crowds can be dangerous when one is immunocompromised. All the more reason for the portion of us who aren’t lonely to reach out to the portion who are.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says to his disciples (according to John). This is part of Jesus’ “farewell discourse,” and long monologue Jesus offers on Maundy Thursday. He knows he’s going to be killed by the powers that be. And, still, he promises that his death won’t leave them orphaned, he won’t leave them isolated and alone. They belong, and as his 21st century disciples we belong, to God’s family. Jesus says that it’s important to keep his commandments, which might seem like a tough thing to do. But at their core, Jesus’ commandments are this: love God and love one another.

And isn’t it wonderful, that when we keep that commandment, when we actively love one another, we become the presence of Jesus for others (whether they recognize it or not). When we love one another, we fulfill Jesus’ promise not to leave us orphaned, not to leave us alone.

I’m not sure what the opposite of loneliness is. I think it has something to do with belonging. I think it has something to do with being home. I think it has something to do with being seen. Perhaps the opposite of being lonely is being found. And having been found, being loved.

In this time of quiet reflection, I invite you to think about the resurrection power of being found. Has this look at the resurrection power of being found unlocked one of your resurrection stories? How might you speak up and share this good news?