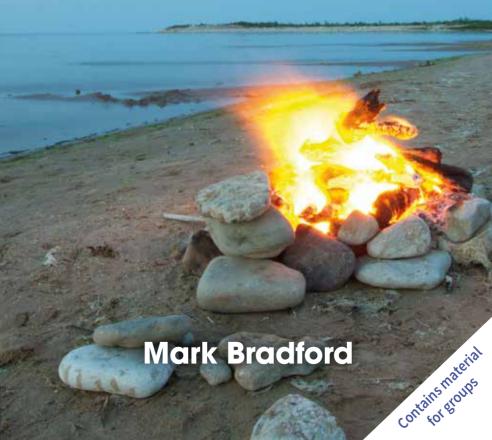
# Encountering the Risen Christ

From Easter to Pentecost: the message of the resurrection and how it can change us



### The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard Abingdon OX14 3FE **brf.org.uk** 

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# Risen Christ

From Easter to Pentecost: the message of the resurrection and how it can change us

**Mark Bradford** 



One suggestion for using this book would be to read it throughout the seven weeks of Easter. In this way, the first chapter would be read in the week following Easter Sunday, while the last would be finished in time for Pentecost Sunday.

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### Seven Stanzas at Easter

Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body; if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle, the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers, each soft spring recurrent; it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles; it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes, the same valved heart that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then regathered out of enduring Might new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence, making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché, not a stone in a story, but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day. And if we will have an angel at the tomb, make it a real angel, weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous, for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty, lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed by the miracle, and crushed by remonstrance.

John Updike (1932-2009)

### - 1 -

### Introduction

Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life'

There is only one qualification needed to experience resurrection: to be dead.<sup>1</sup>

There is a profound difference between a 'meeting' and an 'encounter'.

Meetings are usually planned and predictable events. Encounters are often unplanned and can have consequences far beyond anything that we can imagine. Meetings tend to be fairly superficial affairs in which the 'usual business' is discussed. Encounters are deep affairs in which the agenda is not set by us. We can often walk out of meetings largely unaffected by what has happened. We are unlikely to leave an encounter unchanged. In fact, we may never be the same again.

This was certainly the case for Mary, the disciples as a group, Thomas, Cleopas and his companion, and Peter – as we will explore in these pages. And it was also the case for a young man named Saul.

Saul (or, as he later became known, Paul) set out on a journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. He knew who he was and he knew what he was about. Saul had an immaculately defined sense of identity and one that, at least before he encountered the risen Christ, he was deeply proud of. He was a pure-bred Jew, who could trace his ancestry for 2,000 years, right back to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He even knew from which of Jacob's sons he was descended – it was Benjamin. To be able to know such a thing

gave Saul a great sense of honour and prestige – in the way that a blood connection with royalty or celebrity might today. Saul was circumcised, the sign of belonging for the male Jew, traditionally performed on the eighth day. Furthermore, as a Pharisee, he prided himself on the way in which he kept the law. Like his ancestry and his circumcision, this was a sign of his deep purity as a Jew. Saul, as far as he was concerned, was 'blameless' (Philippians 3:4–6). Far from merely living all this out in his own private world, Saul was fighting for the purity of Israel on a wider stage.

Saul was a man on a mission, consumed with zeal like the great defenders of the faith in years gone by. More specifically, he was determined to eradicate a new religious group, known as 'the Way', which was emerging in and around Jerusalem. For him, this new group was becoming a distraction, even a threat to the beliefs that he held so strongly. In his black-and-white world, such a situation could be tolerated no longer.

Saul is first mentioned in the Bible in the context of the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen was a member of this new sect and was described as being 'full of God's grace and power' and doing 'great wonders and signs among the people' (Acts 6:8). In an act of jealousy, some members of the local synagogue stirred up the people against Stephen and brought false reports about him in order to bring him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Stephen's defence was a brilliant exposition of how Jesus, the very man they had killed on that first Good Friday, was in fact the culmination of their own long and proud story of faith going all the way back to Abraham. Safe to say, this did not go down well, and Stephen was dragged outside the city and stoned. The witnesses to this act laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, and Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, makes it clear that Saul approved of their killing Stephen (Acts 8:1).

Following the martyrdom of Stephen, the followers of Jesus became scattered throughout Judea and Samaria as persecution broke out

against the church in Jerusalem. Ironically, though, this only served to spread the news of Jesus further and wider than before. Where Saul had previously gone from house to house, dragging off men and women to be put into prison (Acts 8:3), he now had to cover a far larger circuit in order to contain the spread of these people who were talking about Jesus as Messiah. In order to do this, he went to the high priest in order to ask permission that he might round up any who, like Stephen, were followers of the Way. Though he did not yet realise it, Saul was fighting against a force far greater than even his own zeal and passion. Unlike his own teacher, Gamaliel, he had not considered the possibility that this new religious group might have divine, rather than human, origins, and that, as a result, he might find himself fighting against God (Acts 5:35–39)! Saul hadn't factored in the reality that the whole world – in fact, the whole cosmos – had changed forever as a result of the events of that first Easter weekend.

It would take Saul some time to catch up with this reality. And so it does still for us today.

### **Introduction to Easter**

Easter has always been the high point of the church year. This can often be difficult for us to appreciate because the society around us tends to get far more excited about Christmas than Easter. And yet, as far as the Christian story is concerned, it is Easter, and not Christmas, that is pivotal. Christmas is significant, of course; but Easter is decisive. As Tom Wright remarked: 'Take Christmas away, and in biblical terms you lose two chapters at the front of Matthew and Luke, nothing else. Take Easter away, and you don't have a New Testament; you don't have a Christianity.' The Message paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 15:14 captures Paul brilliantly on this: 'And face it – if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors.'

Basically, if nothing happened at Easter, we should pack up and go home because there is no 'Christianity'.

But if something did happen at Easter, then it changes everything.

This is what Christians have always believed – that something extraordinary, remarkable, unrepeatable, *did* happen at Easter. And so this event, and only this event, can form the zenith of the church's marking of sacred time. For it was this event that established Jesus Christ as the Son of God in power; as the Lord of the world. And it is on the basis of this event that assurance has been given to the world that God will one day judge the world in righteousness. No wonder, then, that the first apostles in the book of Acts saw themselves as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and that the heart of their message – which would land them in so much conflict with the powers of the day – was to teach and proclaim 'that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead' (Acts 4:2, NRSV; see also Acts 1:22; 17:31; Romans 1:4).

Early Christian sources reveal distinct modes of celebrating Easter.<sup>3</sup> However, the one that became universal was to keep the feast on the Sunday following the Passover, and to focus the celebration upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which, according to all four canonical gospels, had taken place on the first day of the week. Yet, from as early as the second century, a number of sources indicate that the celebration of Easter took place as a 50-day season, rather than merely a day. Paul Bradshaw writes, 'It was regarded as a time of rejoicing, and every day was treated in the same way as Sunday, that is, with no kneeling for prayer or fasting.' Some called the 50 days of Easter 'one great Sunday', while every Sunday in the year was considered a little Easter in which to celebrate the whole story of redemption.

Yet, in my experience, the contemporary church has, in practice at least, lost a vital sense of the importance of Easter. Lent is often kept, with plenty of resources around for this 40-day period preparing

us for Easter. Of course, such a season can be of great benefit in stripping back our lives, in freeing us from our multiple addictions, to ensure that we are holding fast to that which is truly important. The excitement builds from Palm Sunday and into Holy Week, before the foreboding events of Maundy Thursday, the darkness of Good Friday and the silence that is Holy Saturday, and we eventually reach the triumph that is Easter - Christ victorious, death defeated, grave denied! But somehow, inexplicably, we only celebrate this for a single day. And yet, as I've said, Easter in the church calendar is not just a single day; it is a whole season. And where Lent was 40 days long, the Easter season is 50. The energy put into our self-denial during Lent should be far outstripped, both in intensity and longevity, by the energy put into feasting and celebration during Easter. Chaplain Mike observes well the lack of imagination around the practice of the season of Faster.

Shouldn't Easter Sunday unleash a season of festivity unlike any other? Shouldn't it bring a time of celebration unmatched by any other season? Why is there not a flood of Easter music? Why not an entire season of feasting, rejoicing, doing good works, showing generosity, practicing hospitality, giving gifts, engaging in special mission and service projects, holding sacred concerts and art festivals, and decorating our homes, churches, and communities with beautiful reminders of new life and hope?...

But it's not just what we do (or don't do) when we get together this time of year. It's the lack of theology, the lack of in-depth discussion, the lack of consideration, contemplation, and immersion in resurrection life that I'm missing in me and all around me. What difference does it make that Jesus is alive and seated at the right hand of the Father?4

I have a feeling that this is not simply a matter that concerns our worship and celebration, but, intrinsically, also something which detrimentally affects the quality of our discipleship and mission. For it is not just who or what we worship that shapes us, but also how and when. Thus, the church very often misses what Easter, resurrection, and new creation mean in practice and how they affect everything concerning what it means to follow Jesus. I spoke recently to a friend who had spent her life in churches where she was continually told that she needed to 'die to herself'. This is all well and good but, by itself, it had left her with a very negative view of herself. What she had not been given the chance to hear was the invitation, in Christ, to be raised to new life – with new hope and new possibilities at work, both in her and through her. A message of crucifixion emphasised above resurrection, of Good Friday above Easter, is really no message at all. But tragically, all too many contemporary understandings have tended to swing towards this extreme.

So what does the surprising reality of Easter and the wonder of the resurrection actually mean for the church? For creation and the cosmos? For me? Perhaps it is time for us, like Saul, to encounter afresh the risen Christ.

### The nature of an encounter

In any encounter with the risen Christ, there are perhaps at least three stages to journey through: as for Saul, so for us.

### 1 Disorientation

The first stage of any encounter is that of disorientation – for our known worlds to be called into question. This sounds harsh, and yet, as the Greek philosopher Epictetus observed not long after Saul, 'it is impossible for anyone to begin to learn that which he thinks he already knows'. For Saul, a man so full of conviction and certainty, of zeal and confidence, it would be a dramatic event. Perhaps it had to be this way for him.

Saul was journeying along the road, coming to the edge of Damascus – ready to complete his mission – and then, suddenly, there was

a flash of light from heaven. He fell to the floor and a voice began speaking to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:4–6). For Saul, calling all the shots, and deciding exactly what would be done to whom in Damascus, this must have been a hugely disorientating experience. Suddenly he was not in control any more; someone else was calling the shots. Saul was unable to see for three days – a man of zealous vision, suddenly rendered blind. More alarming still, this person calling all the shots said that he was 'Jesus', who Saul would have known all about.

Saul would have known that Jesus was a prophet, with claims to be the Jewish messiah, but that he had been crucified and buried not long before. And, of course, Saul would have heard the claims of the early followers of Jesus that, in fact, this Jesus had not stayed dead but had been raised to life again. Yet Saul was having none of it, and was doing all that he could to root out such absurd claims. Quite simply, a crucified messiah was a failed messiah. And, besides, Jesus' 'resurrection' was all wrong. The hope of Israel at this time was for resurrection, but, crucially, it would be corporate – for all of Israel – and it would come at the end of the age. Jesus simply did not fit into these expectations: his was a resurrection happening to one person in the middle of time. Saul had no categories in which to fit such an understanding of resurrection. So he did what we all do: he sought to eradicate whatever did not fit into his preconceived understanding.

For Saul to be able to journey forwards – not so much towards Damascus but in terms of his understanding of God and his purposes in the world – he had first to be brought to his knees. For him to truly be able to see, he first had to be blinded. For a new world to come into view, his known world had first to be levelled, with everything he had built his life on to this point called into question. Encountering the risen Christ would do all these things for Saul, and an encounter with the risen Christ can be equally disorientating for people today.

Many churches leave feedback cards for visitors to fill in with questions, notes, prayer requests and the like. One church in California received the following feedback one Sunday: 'I was enjoying a cup of coffee with some members of your church and when the music started I followed them inside. What a shock! Songs about Jesus, stories about Jesus, prayers to Jesus. It was like I had walked into some creepy Jesus cult. You do know he's been dead for 2,000 years, right?'

How we all need reminding – not least those of us in the 'Jesus cult' – that he isn't dead; he is alive! How we need the unexpected to disorient us, to blow us off course, to call into question our current way of living. How we need a fresh encounter with the risen Christ. Easter was the most genuinely surprising event the world has ever seen. We cannot turn the power of this, nor our walking with the risen Christ, into something predictable. Christ is always reliable, but he is never predictable. We need always to be open to the ways in which he will seek to disrupt the usual business of our lives. Disorientation is so important, because the older we get, the more set in our ways we tend to become. We commit ourselves to a particular path and, once committed, it can be hard to change course.

This is really what the Christian term 'repentance' is about: changing course; unlearning in order to relearn. As Alvin Toffler has pointed out, 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.' And yet, our own stubbornness aside, another obstacle to unlearning and relearning is the pace of modern life itself. As the pace of life becomes faster and faster, there is barely enough time to do, let alone to think, reflect and consider whether we are walking the right way. We may be aware of the sadnesses, the fears, the questions, the failures and the shattered dreams that we carry around with us, like baggage on our backs, but we have no time to consider what we might do with them.

Sometimes, the only way that God can get through to us is to bring us to our knees. To stop us in our tracks. To bring us to a point where life

simply doesn't make sense any more; and we need to pause, to reflect on the disorientation, and then to reimagine other possibilities. We need to realise that we are 'dead' and in need of resurrection.

### 2 Reimagination

If an encounter with the risen Christ is like an explosion, then its purpose is to blast away the old and to clear some space in which to reimagine God, Jesus, the world, oneself – everything! The encounter on the road to Damascus was that explosion for Paul, forcing him to reimagine everything he had previously held as central. In fact, he had to spend the next few years of his life reworking previous understandings. When he came to write to the Philippian believers, he was able to say:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

PHILIPPIANS 3:4-8, NRSV

This is reimagination on an epic scale – everything that was previously profit now written off as loss. Paul's encounter with the risen Christ did indeed change everything for him.

The standard Jewish way of viewing the world – to which Paul certainly adhered – was that there was one God (monotheism), one people chosen by God to bring blessing to the world (election), and one future for the world (eschatology). And yet on each of these counts, in the light of the explosion that was his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul had to rethink and reimagine utterly his whole way of viewing the world and living within it. His belief in one God, so vital

in preventing a fall into idolatry, had to be rethought around Jesus and the Spirit. Thus, as early as Paul's letter to the Galatians – which is one of the earliest Christian documents we possess – Tom Wright notes, 'One might conclude that if the doctrine of the Trinity had not come into existence it would be necessary to invent it.'

The sense of being part of the chosen people of God had to be expanded around the work of Christ in his death and resurrection such that now, 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). The ground is truly level at the foot of the cross; divisions that once held sway have now been smashed down. Finally, there was a realisation that God's future for the world had, in Christ, come forward into the present. Resurrection, expected for all at the end of time, had happened in the middle of time for Jesus. The renewal of all things would still wait to the end for its final consummation, yet there was a realisation for Paul, because of Easter as well as the ascension, that Christ is already reigning, and with him the people of God too.

In the light of his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul profoundly reimagined everything that made up his life and his worldview.

We are invited to do the same – to see the world in an entirely different light, with all that we carry around with us through life. In the ground cleared by an encounter with the risen Christ, is there space to reimagine our sorrows, our fears, our doubts, our sense of failure, and our shattered dreams? What does the fact that Jesus died but rose again mean to us in each of these areas? Where have we stopped imagining new possibilities for our lives and convinced ourselves that the 'old script' is the only one that has the potential to shape us?

As we look at the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the risen Christ (chapter 2), we will see that she was invited to journey with him from sadness to hope.

As we think about the disciples in the upper room (chapter 3), we see that Jesus meets them in their fear and invites them towards a place of confidence.

Through the story of Thomas (chapter 4), we see someone with doubts and questions whom the risen Lord Jesus beckoned towards a fresh encounter through which his faith was confirmed.

In the journey of the two disciples towards Emmaus (chapter 5), we see two people whose dreams were shattered but who, through an encounter with a stranger in word and action, found the opportunity for a new beginning.

In Peter we see someone who dramatically failed Jesus (chapter 6), but who found in an encounter with the risen Christ both forgiveness and restoration.

What was possible for all of them is equally possible for us, as we encounter the same risen Christ. Christ meets us where we are and invites us to journey with him, from our brokenness and toward his wholeness.

### 3 Transformation

The test of whether one has truly encountered the risen Christ is always in terms of transformed living.

Paul's experience of disorientation and reimagination was never about abstract theology, divorced from the reality of life. Rather, this was the very frame of reference into which he would live and minister for Christ. Paul, always a man on a mission, would take on a very different mission from the one that he had been embarking on before the Damascus road experience. The most passionate and pure-bred of Jews would become the apostle to the Gentiles. The one-time persecutor of the church would suffer immense persecution for Christ – though he would see this as participating

in Christ's own sufferings, on the way to gaining resurrection life himself (Philippians 3:10-11). And, according to Christian tradition, this would eventually lead to him losing his life - like his master, obedient unto death - although, in Paul's mind, this really meant gaining his life and being with Christ.

Sometimes I think we can get stuck on this one. So many of our approaches in church gatherings, of one sort and another, are typically information-heavy – think sermons, Bible studies, courses, conferences, even this book! Now, of course, there is a place for all these things; but sometimes it can feel as though we are saturated with information but sorely lacking in transformation. Mahatma Gandhi, the pre-eminent leader of the Indian independence movement in British-ruled India, once said: 'I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ. If the Christians lived their gospel, there would be no more Hindus in India.'7 Were he still alive today, what would his judgement be on today's church?

Contrast this with the following description of Christians in the second century:

Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life... Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each one's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as resident aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their food with each other, but not their marriage bed... They love all people, and by all are persecuted. They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich... They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect... To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world.<sup>8</sup>

These early Christians stood out from those around them. They were a part of society; yet they had a distinctive way of living. For example, in an ancient society in which excess babies, especially baby girls, were taken to the local 'landfill' to die of exposure, Christians went to the rubbish dumps to rescue them and then to raise them as their own children. Furthermore, these Christians also shared their possessions; they didn't take revenge when they were attacked; they were buoyant even when they were persecuted. They had encountered the risen Christ as a living reality in their own lives and their lives were transformed as a result.

This begs the question as to how truly different Christians are from those around them today. We may believe different things from our friends and family who are not Christians, but how radically distinctive are we in the way that we live out our lives? Dallas Willard refers to the modern curse of 'barcode Christianity', in which people affirm Christian belief – as though hoping to receive an invisible barcode that God scans at the entrance of heaven to determine who can enter – and yet remain unchanged both on the inside and in how they conduct their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Yet one thing is certain: encountering the risen Christ truly changes people.

Just think about Paul. He was the persecutor of the church who became a planter of churches. The man who had once sought to tear the church apart became someone who gave everything physically, emotionally and spiritually to build it up; the one who approved of

the killing of Christians became one himself, and is likely to have been martyred for his faith (probably in Rome around AD66 during the persecution under Emperor Nero). That's guite some turnaround.

The same is true of Mary, Thomas, Peter, the couple on the road to Emmaus, and the disciples as a whole – all were radically changed. They moved from sadness to hope, from fear to confidence, from doubt to confirmation, from failure to restoration, and from shattered dreams to new beginnings.

But this wasn't about an invitation to some kind of therapeutic fulfilment. In a consumer age, there is always the danger that we will interpret Jesus' promise of 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10, GNB) as simply a Christian version of the consumer dream in which we are given health, wealth and all we could ever hope for. On the contrary, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.'10 For, as Jesus had said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it' (Mark 8:34-35). In the same way that Easter Sunday was only possible because Jesus walked the way of Good Friday, so the journey to sharing in Christ's resurrection life cannot come to us any other way than through faith and baptism and being prepared also to share in his death. For many of the early disciples, and for many disciples of Jesus today, this can mean martyrdom. However, at the very least it means being prepared for this, and walking a whole new way, whatever happens.

In New Testament times encountering the risen Christ changed people. He is still in the business of changing people today.

### Pause and reflect: 'Prayer of St Brendan'

St Brendan the Voyager reputedly set sail from Ireland in the fifth century in a small coracle made of wood and oxhide, and ended up in Newfoundland. His story, and the prayer below, inspire us to journey into disorientation, reimagination and transformation with the risen Christ.

Take some time to pray slowly through this prayer:

Lord, I will trust You; help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown.

Give me the faith to leave old ways and break fresh ground with You.

Christ of the mysteries, can I trust You to be stronger than each storm in me?

Strengthen me with Your blessing and appoint to me the task.

Teach me to live with eternity in view. Tune my spirit to the music of heaven.

Feed me, and, somehow, make my obedience count for You.<sup>11</sup>

### **Discussion questions**

- Do you think we over-celebrate at Christmas and under-celebrate at Easter? How could we celebrate Easter as a season rather than simply a day?
- Would you say that you know who you are and what you are about? Is it a good thing or a bad thing to know this?
- Can you recall a moment where you have felt 'disoriented' in your faith? Was this a good or a bad thing?
- What might limit our ability to reimagine?
- Why do you think that transformation is often such a slow process for us?



## Enabling all ages to grow in faith



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How can we encounter the risen Lord Jesus in a life-transforming way? How can we be equipped and strengthened to share the message of the resurrection with the world?

The post-resurrection encounters between Jesus and the disciples provide us with some of the most profound and personal moments to be found in scripture. The risen Christ comes to his disciples in all their brokenness – their sadness, fear, doubt, shattered dreams and failure – and calls them to a future filled with hope, confidence, confirmed faith, new beginnings and restored lives.

**Encountering the Risen Christ** reflects on the main characters in the post-resurrection accounts and shows how we too can encounter Jesus Christ in a life-transforming way. The seven chapters plus discussion material can be used across the seven weeks from Easter to Pentecost in individual reflection or group study, or at any time of year.



Mark Bradford is in full-time Church of England ministry, currently based at Holy Trinity Church, Ripon. He was previously a secondary school teacher and also worked for the Oasis Trust in Leeds, training and discipling 18–25 year olds. He is married with three young children.



