

## **Address by Ash Leighton Plom for 1 May 2022**

Risen Lord Jesus, show yourself again to us your disciples gathered here together like those first disciples gathered by the shore. Feed us and teach us so that we all may be nourished to live and tell the truth of your resurrection. Amen.

Good morning once again, and for those of you who don't yet know me - perhaps who are new - my name is Ash, and it's my joy to be on your preaching team here at St David's Church Exeter with St Michael's Mt Dinham.

How is it May already?! I feel like it was Christmas a minute ago! But two whole weeks ago we celebrated Easter, and our readings today continue the Easter season theme of records of the Resurrection, and accounts of conversion, like St Paul's.

I want to say St Peter's, too: where Paul is converted from anti-Christian zeal to Christian zeal, Peter also goes from rejecting, or denying, Christ to being a great messenger for the truth of the Resurrection and its infinite significance.

John beautifully details Peter's restoration as just one of the many things Jesus did, before John runs out of scroll and has to stop writing. Our reading's section started with the words, "After these things", and - if it helps to know - the "things" that had happened in the immediately preceding chapter of John's account include several other appearances of the risen Jesus to stunned early Christians, such as Mary Magdalene and "doubting Thomas".

John reiterates that he's writing his account "so that" his readers and listeners "may come to believe" – to be persuaded of the truth of his message, and to receive life on account of it.

I've shared with many of you before some of the details of my journey to belief in Jesus: I used to think that science had disproven God, and religion was a thing of the past. Until one transformative moment when I met a faithful latter-day Ananias called Bernard. We met in a coffee shop, quite by chance, and he engaged me in conversation, listened to me, then totally surprised me by challenging me to look into Christianity.

That was the very last thing on my radar, but there was something sincere to him that made me curious enough to do it. So, in my case, after eight months of serious study, I remember calling him on the phone to agree: it's true. The biblical and surrounding evidence is abundant and persuasive that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Now, I know some people think that sharing the faith is the job of clergy or other Christian leaders. But we should remember that Peter, John, Mary and so on were all ordinary people who God used to tell others about his glorious deeds.

Similarly, throughout the epistles, Paul for example uses phrases like "we have this treasure", and "we have this ministry" - "we", not "I". I recommend Edward L. Smither's great book, *Mission in the Early Church*, which makes the point that this is how the news of the Resurrection was passed from person to person: ordinary people telling others the incredible facts about Jesus as they went about their daily lives and business.

This is how it's passed on today, as well: ordinary people sharing their belief and reasons for their belief with others. Indeed, current research shows that conversations about Jesus with friends and strangers are how most people nowadays become Christians.

About 67% of people in the UK know a Christian, but only 1% know a church leader. So the majority of opportunities for these conversations are with Christians who aren't church leaders.

I myself am evidence for this. I wouldn't likely have met with a church leader, but someone I was chatting with in a coffee shop just invited me to explore Christian faith.

[Year by year, the number of people attending church in this country is currently tanking. So we can't assume people will opt in to come and hear the Easter message, the amazing scriptural witness, that Jesus died and rose again.]

Happily, we have a lot of resources available to us right now to help. You can invite people to coffee and cake (on a Tuesday or Thursday at St David's or Wednesday at St Michael's). No agenda needed for the conversation, just a nice place to meet, and introduce them to the space. Then while they're here, you can give them a copy of the magazine.

I did this with one of the school mums last term, just invited her to coffee, gave her a magazine, and now she's a regular and has joined the volunteering team.

We also have a number of musical events you could invite friends and neighbours to: next Sunday at 4pm we have an acoustic session of music and conversation that will be a great time to bring friends to. And in a couple of weeks, we have the concert

coming up on Saturday 14th for Jemima, which you can plug as a charity event, and bring friends to.

We also have specific resources coming up this week and for the next few weeks: Tuesdays starting this week (3<sup>rd</sup> May) we're running an Alpha/confirmation course at St David's Church for anyone wanting to explore and confirm their faith in a supportive "no question is stupid" environment of welcome. So, this could be a space to come and wrestle with your own doubts and hear good reasons for faith, maybe indeed with a friend.

Then in a few weeks' time, from 22<sup>nd</sup> May, Thrive is running a series called Living & Telling on Sundays at 4. Living & Telling is designed to encourage and inspire anyone to help people encounter Jesus through everyday life, whatever your age, whether you are already confident talking about faith or whether you are really really reticent! It's an ecumenical, theologically robust and profoundly practical course, and everyone I know who has done it really rates it. You can find out more on this month's magazine, which is now available.

So, this Easter season, as we follow these Scriptures about the Resurrection and early Christians sharing their faith, let's hear this invitation to join them, and come along to support the cafe space opportunities, music sessions, Alpha Confirmation course, and Living and Telling. Through them, I pray we all might be empowered like Mary, like Peter, like Paul, and all the early Christians to share our stories of faith, in our lives. Amen.