



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Ascension Day 2021 Holy Eucharist 6pm

Today we mark the Ascension of the Lord. 40 days after the Resurrection He goes up to take up His heavenly throne. 40 days before He had done the opposite: He was down emptying hell. He died on the Friday, and descended to the dead. **'Hell seized a body and met God face to face'** says St John Chrysostom. Having smashed the gates of death, on the third day rose again. And then, after 40 days appearing to His friends, He ascended into heaven. Thanks to His Ascension, a human being whole and real is in heaven – He has gone before us so that we might follow Him home.

We acknowledge a multilayered universe: The descent into hell, life on earth, and the ascension into heaven. Earth, heaven, and hell.

But we know that simplistic 'it's just beyond that cloud' views of heaven, and 'don't dig too deep, Dave, or you'll hit the devil on the head with your shovel' views of hell are a nonsense. We know that much of the superstition attached to the world by some of our forebears were simply pagan worldly values glued onto Christian theology. We don't see the world as our forebears did, thank goodness. But perhaps, just perhaps, in our efforts to dispense with the worst of medieval peasant superstition, we have simply glued a different set of pagan assumptions onto our faith.

We have swapped their superstitious multi layered pagan universe, for another **still pagan** universe – just a flat one. It's no more Christian. Mystery has been swapped for capitalist market conceptions of value and meaning. We have exchanged ghoulish spiritual powers for the cult of choice, so-called-freedom and individualism in the basic building blocks of our world view. So much that has been exposed and tested by a COVID year.

Our public conversation today, and thus so often our way of living in our families, and communities and even within ourselves, has become so black and white: 'no longer than a soundbite' and with so little capacity for nuance and complexity.

Christ's descent into hell and ascension into heaven suggest that we need to recover the multi layers but in a truly *Christian* way.

Heaven and Hell are real.

One of the reasons we know this is because we have the capacity to be living them *now*. Heaven is the fullness of life with our creator – lost in wonder, love and praise forever. We have the capacity to start glimpsing that now. In prayer, in Holy Communion, in the love we share with other human beings, in all sorts of ways; we glimpse now what will drench us like a glorious ocean wave, then. That's why a balanced life of tending our relationships with each other and being dedicated to our Spiritual health with regular times of prayer and frequent reception of Holy Communion is such an important foundation for a real life.

Likewise, hell is to be cut off from life's source. Isolation. The opposite of going with Jesus into life is to imagine that the triumph of man is to stand on his own two feet; to know and possess and cause himself. That is hell, because that is the mistake the ancient Jewish scriptures tell us the devil made. In great Eastern icons of the Resurrection, Jesus stands over the doors of hell that He has smashed off their hinges and is leading Adam and Eve and all their descendants out, **by the hand**, from death to life. **By the hand**.

Self-dependence is death. Loving union is life.

Those are true of the realities of heaven and hell, and they begin to become true for us even on this side of death. This life is not far removed from what will be (that multi-layered picture with which we began). We are already living in the light of Easter, already living on a path that will lead in the way Christ has prepared for us, to our true homeland, our true selves. Today a human being is in heaven and he has made an eternal home for us there.

Or we are already living a destiny of sad separation and putrifying arrogance.

Death and hell have been defeated by our Lord Jesus Christ, let's stop trying to recreate them for ourselves and each other. Instead, let us follow where Christ has gone before. Alleluia! Amen!