



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Friday after Ascension Day 2020

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Alleluia!*

Jesus' post-Resurrection physical leave-taking of his disciples was a not a linear fading out, but a complex and confusing process which the gospel writers try to capture in different ways. Most of them use the well-known Hebrew 'device' of a period of 40 days.

Noah spent 40 days in the Ark, the Hebrew peoples wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, Mary carried Jesus in her womb for 40 weeks, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness and 40 hours sealed in the stone cold tomb.

To begin with, in this period of 40 days, Jesus seems to have made himself known to his disciples very physically: he came to them as they broke bread, as they gathered for prayer, as they studied the scriptures, as they hauled fish out of the sea into their boats and as they ate breakfast together.

Wherever the disciples gathered together in his name, there he was, with his disciples, just as he promised he would be.

But whilst Jesus was 'physically' present, more often than not, like Mary Magdalene in the Garden or like Thomas in the

Upper Room, the disciples did not always recognize this physical 'presence' to be Jesus.

Something we forget all too easily is that the post-Resurrection Jesus was very different from the Jesus the disciples had seen crucified and buried.

The post-Resurrection Jesus was not simply a reanimated corpse; the Resurrected Jesus was already the Jesus who was returning to the Father.

The Gospel writers use Ascension Day, which we celebrated yesterday, not so much to mark Jesus' Ascension to the Father, but his final leave-taking of his disciples.

And so it is, in the various accounts of the events of the days between the Resurrection and Pentecost, and in John's Gospel they are, of course, one and the same, Jesus does two things:

first, the disciples know that he blesses them and, second,

they know that somehow Jesus will never leave them, no matter where they go, no matter what they do.

In the days after his Resurrection, Jesus gives a blessing and makes a promise.

Ascension Day is the day the disciples graduate as apostles: their training, their education, their apprenticeship is over. Jesus' Ascension sees the disciples 'come of age', launched not out into the deeps of the Sea of Galilee but into a world, waiting, hungry, thirsty for the Good News.

The Master hands over his business to a once-disparate group, now come of age and he assured them that all shall be well; that in his name and by the power of the promised Holy Spirit, they will be able to do continue what he had done; that they would succeed where he had appeared to fail; that they would be the ones to extend the Father's kingdom which had taken flesh in Mary's womb in ways that would be beyond their wildest imaginings.

Jesus' takes his physical leave of the disciples and returns to the Father and, in his going, those who know him know themselves blessed and that they will never be alone.

Jesus taking leave of his disciples is not a desertion and the disciples are not left devastated but filled with new hope as they begin to explore a whole new Spirit-filled way of living in his continued and very real presence.

Like the disciples, we must not stand about staring into heaven, looking for Jesus who has returned to the Glory of the Father; we must become his Spirit-filled apostles, living, proclaiming, building and extending the Kingdom.

Alleluia!