



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 27, 2011

The Third Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong

at 4pm

+

A Sermon by

The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

+

HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

(Apostles' Creed Series, Sermon 9)

Jesus said, "In my father's house are many mansions: I go to prepare a place for you....that where I am, you may be also."¹

"Jesus is a carpenter who builds houses, but often nobody wants to live in them. We like to build our own places, even though we don't know how to build, therefore some of us inhabit half-finished ruins while most of us wander around homeless. Are you one of those in need of a house?"² Are you homeless?

The best accounts we have of Jesus' ascension are both written by Saint Luke, the first in his gospel³ and the second in the Acts of the Apostles⁴. After Easter day and during the forty days that followed, the resurrected Jesus continued to teach his disciples. At the conclusion of this time, the disciples witnessed him being taken up into the sky in a cloud. In the account from Acts two men in white appear and ask the disciples, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" It is this pivotal moment in the history of the world that the line from the Apostles Creed, "He ascended into heaven" describes.

Let's begin with Christmas and the Incarnation in which the earth was prepared like a cradle to accept a baby. Jesus is an exceptional baby to be sure, but he is a baby. The word made flesh. He is the Son of God, born of a woman. In that little child, God's divinity and our humanity are both fully present, "the distinction of these two natures being in no way annulled by the union"⁵. Is Jesus fully God? Yes, he is. And is he fully human? Absolutely. Thus a kinship is born between God and men that never existed before.

Now, the baby grows up and manifests that he is both fully human, being subject to temptation, to hunger and thirst and fatigue, and joy, despair, grief, pain, suffering and death. He is also fully God having power over elemental forces, over time and space and disease, wind, rain and sea, over powers and principalities, over demons, angels and death.

But he does not shun death. At the end of his earthly life, Jesus dies a real and human death. This is no sham, or illusion, or fakery; as my grandfather says, "He is deader'n four o'clock." But then after three days, he is not dead any more. He is really and bodily

¹ Jn 14.2-3

² *Ordet*

³ Luke 24.50-52

⁴ Acts 1.9-11

⁵ Chalcedonian Definition

alive. Again, no sham, illusion, or fakery, and he is not a ghost. He is as real and bodily present as you and I are now, only better. Through his voluntarily submission to death, in obedience to his Father's will, it can be said, as Paul does, "But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept."⁶ And elsewhere in his letter to the Hebrews, Paul encourages us to look "to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross."⁷

If Jesus is the first fruit of the dead, then who are the second, third, fourth etc, etc? Who are the ones that might follow after the first? You are. If Jesus is the pioneer, one who goes on ahead blazing a trail for others who might follow, then who are the ones that will go after him? It might be you. You will certainly die a real death. Your body will rot. But it might also rise again to the life everlasting and move on to that place that Jesus has promised to prepare for us.

The surprising thing is how important the ascension is to all that. As the disciples watch Jesus ascend to heaven, they are watching a full human person, soul and body ascend to heaven. So that when Jesus arrives in God's presence, he has taken something with him, that no man or woman had ever taken there before. He took his body; he took our humanity. The same humanity that went into the grave, has now been raised out of the tomb to a new and glorified life, and is taken up into heaven, "a place strange to human nature" until Jesus took it there. And then he presents it to God and God accepts it and bids it sit in that favored spot at his right hand.

That is the place that Jesus has gone on ahead to prepare for us and he once told us that we already know the way to where he was going. But then, as now there are those of us who say, "But I don't know the way." To which Jesus answers, "I am the way. I am truth and I am life."⁸

God's deepest longing is that you desire to live in his house, not in a ruin of your own making, but the one that Jesus has gone to prepare for you. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."⁹

It's one thing to believe in the dead Christ of 2000 years ago, and another entirely to believe in the living Christ of today. Christ is alive, body and soul and he has prepared the same way for those who love him. The pledge of the certainty is that on a real day, in a real place, a real man ascended into heaven.

The man is a carpenter who builds houses, but often nobody wants to live in them. Therefore some of us live in half-finished ruins or wander about homeless. Are you one of those in need of a house?

⁶ 1 Co 15.20

⁷ Heb 12.2

⁸ Jn 14.6

⁹ Jn 12.32