

April 9, 2023
Easter Sunday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

Maybe it's a little odd, but I quite enjoy visiting old cemeteries. When I am in an old cemetery, I feel a lot of peace and a little curiosity. It's as if time collapses, and I sense the presence of those who have come and gone. I wander among the headstones, looking especially for the oldest ones. I read them and wonder about the lives of the people commemorated. I note their ages and who was related to whom. I wonder what they were like, what their lives were like, what made them sad or what made them joyful.

New England offers old cemeteries in abundance. For the last couple of years, the one I have visited most often is Hillside Cemetery in Cheshire. My wife, Jakki, and I started going there during the pandemic. Our first visit was on March 21, 2021. I know that because I took photos of some of the headstones. Cast back in your own memories, and you'll remember that we were then still quite limited by the pandemic at that time, though vaccines were starting to be rolled out. It was a Saturday afternoon, and one of the first really warm days of that spring, and so we drove up to Sweet Claude's for ice cream. Because many others had the same idea, their outside seating was crowded. So we decided, as we sometimes have been known to do, to take our ice cream to the nearest cemetery. That required some Googling, and that's how we discovered Hillside.

We browsed as we ate, and then we browsed some more. Among the photos I took that day are close-ups of one particular weathered old brownstone headstone. At the top is a crude carving of a winged head with another smaller one offset below and to the left. I've read that these figures represent the souls of the deceased.¹ In the middle of the headstone is this inscription:

In Memory of Mr. Jedediah Hull Who
Died March ye 20th AD 1783 in ye 28th
year of his Age and Abigail Alma Hull
Daughter to Mr. Jedediah and Mrs. Abigail Hull
Who Died February ye 3^d 1783 in ye 5th
month of her Age

At the bottom of that headstone is this:

Death which came on man by the fall
Cuts down Father child and all
Here our bodyes lye mouldering to the dust
We cannot come for you but you must come to us²

I'd complain about those glum Puritans, but glum feels pretty appropriate in this case. A young father and his baby dead six weeks apart; I presume the grieving wife and mother was left behind. During the thick of the pandemic, it's no wonder that this headstone caught my eye. Then and now, it makes me feel sad, but sadness is not *all* I feel. I don't know quite how to describe it. It's almost as if I can sense the passage of time working upon those people and their circumstances, crafting like water eroding rock a sort of resolution, a sort of completion. It feels peaceful. It feels *holy*.

That feeling of accompaniment I get in old cemeteries is similar to the one I get when I'm alone upstairs in the Lounge. I attribute that feeling to the presence of the two beautiful portraits, which are of the first rector of St. Thomas's Church, Eben Edwards Beardsley, and his wife, Jane Mathews Beardsley. Eben came here from St. Peter's Church in Cheshire, which, from Hillside Cemetery, is a stone's throw away across what is now State Route 10. He served St. Thomas's for nearly 44 years, until he died at age 83.

At the end of your service bulletin you'll see a brief history of this church. Feel free to take your bulletin home so that you can read it at your leisure. Among other tidbits, you'll see that the church went from organizational meeting to recruiting a priest to finding a space to first service in one day shy of two months. That seems impossible. Even with our instant communication, we could *not* accomplish that today.

Eben never served in this location—he served at the “temporary” and “permanent” buildings at the church's original location downtown on Elm Street just off the New Haven Green. There exists a photograph of him in his study. You can see all of him. He's sitting in a wooden rocking chair, and behind him is a chock-full bookcase.³ I imagine him there, reading and writing, always with paper and pen. I envy the lack of a smartphone, or email, or even a regular landline of a telephone. But I don't envy the lack of health care. His wife, Jane, died young, at 27, three years after she and Eben moved to New Haven, of a brief illness. Their daughter was six years old. I couldn't find her cause of death, but it was probably something that today would be readily survived. Even never remarried and seemed to carry his love for Jane right up to the day of his death.

Most of Eben's sermons were destroyed after his death. That's what he wanted. And that's according to the biography written by his nephew William, who was the second rector of this church. But a collection of special-occasion sermons did survive. In his sermon for St. Thomas's 25th anniversary, 150 years ago, Eben noted a churchgoer's sarcastic observation that the church was named St. Thomas's due to the “doubtfulness of the project.”⁴ This uncertainty was also a theme of his sermon for the church's 10th anniversary fifteen years before that. Apparently it was an ongoing thing. This is part of what he said:

Ten years ago on this Easter festival a little company, with more zeal than means, and more faith than influence, gathered in the Lecture Room near the foot of Orange street, and then and there the services of St. Thomas' Church were begun. The Parish had been duly formed February 24th, two months previous to these opening services, and the intermediate time had been used by the members in obtaining a Rector, and arranging and providing for his support. Such was the pecuniary weakness of the original organization, and so uninviting outwardly was the whole prospect, that the question with the people could not have been, as with wealthy and long established parishes, "who shall be called to the rectorship?" but, who will come and throw himself into this position of anxiety and care and self-sacrifice, and work with us in faith, building up and looking for the reward of his labors more to the future than the present? I remember the hour when with fear and trembling, I decided on the acceptance of your invitation, and afterwards removed hither to undertake responsibilities that I might have prudently declined. Having "faith as a grain of mustard seed," that the tree would grow and spread forth its salubrious branches, "I have continued unto this day," never for a moment listening to the suggestion, that the field of usefulness could be changed, and a situation taken where the emoluments of the Pastoral office might be much greater, while its cares and anxieties would certainly be less. The number present at the first communion, which was the Easter communion, celebrated when the services were opened, was 25, and about 30 families originally composed the parish and congregation. Of these families, some, like the blade of grain which had not much deepness of earth, soon withered away, and of the rest, but eight are still connected with us, thus showing the rapid changes which a decade of years produces in a little congregation. The Pastor sees and notes these changes, though others are constantly coming in to supply the vacancies occasioned by death and removal. His register, like that at the inn, is scarcely more than a record of arrivals and departures. At best his flock resembles the river that rolls along over its bed, always full, but never for one hour the same. Before even the year in which the Parish was formed had closed, it was plain to be seen that the enterprise, by the blessing of God, must succeed ...⁵

Of course I'm talking about all this because today is not just Easter Sunday, it's the 175th anniversary of this church. In some ways, things haven't changed much since 1848, as you can tell from Eben's words. American society was and is undergoing a period of great social upheaval; this church was and is subject to chronic financial difficulties and parishioner turnover. For all the similarities between then and now, *this* is a particularly challenging time. The landscape for mainline Protestantism was already in rapid flux before the pandemic pushed the turbo button on the rate of change.

Since startup Sunday last September, I have been thinking about this anniversary. Inheriting the legacy of a church can feel like a weighty responsibility, for priest and parishioners alike. For me, it helps to remember that history, with all its ups and downs. The observations Eben made about that first decade might describe every decade since. As things played out, this congregation *has* been uniquely changeable over its 175 years of life. See, for example, the move from Elm Street to here. But the thing is, despite this, or maybe because of it, although some things pass away, there has always been new life afoot.

Let's turn finally to the gospel reading from John. On Friday, we left off with Jesus laid in the tomb. This morning, we picked up with Mary Magdalene returning while it's still dark. It wouldn't surprise me if she has spent most of her time at that tomb since it was sealed with that stone. Maybe for her that tomb is painful fact and harsh metaphor. Maybe *she* feels dead inside. Maybe she doesn't think she will ever feel alive again.

Of course, as she soon learns, that sealed tomb is not the end of the story. The story has actually never ended and it never will end, because the assurance of the resurrection is that death always yields new life.

One of the names for Mary Magdalene is "the Apostle to the Apostles." I think we sell her short if we assume she was the Apostle only to those first Apostles. I think she's the Apostle to all of the Apostles ever after, including us. She brings that day from her time *all the way* to ours, carrying with her both the facts and the feelings. So much of life is moving from loss to loss, but Mary collects our grief and transforms it. Through Mary's eyes *we* see that the tomb is empty; through Mary's eyes *we* see that death sows the seeds of new life; through Mary's eyes *we* see that Jesus is risen. Through Jesus, God is redeeming and reconciling, resolving and completing, bringing us ultimately to that place where suffering is no more.

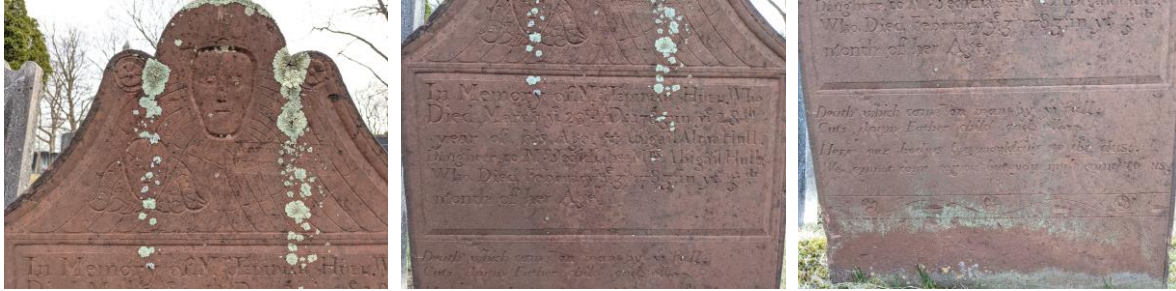
It occurs to me that when visit those old cemeteries, I'm meeting Mary at the tomb. By the time we arrive, the rock has been pushed aside and the tomb is empty. But there is lots of evidence that it has been used. Together we remember that enclosure was not the point, that enclosure was never the point. The point was liberation. Jesus frees us into new life, in time *real* and in time *ultimate*. I'm reminded of the line from the committal portion of our funeral rite: "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."⁶

Maybe visiting old cemeteries and learning old history work in similar ways. Somewhat paradoxically, the result, at least for me, is actually an *unburdening* from the concerns of the day. Death is a part of life; also, *resurrection* is a part of life. It's easier to see that when you look back over some distance. Doing so provides not a weighing down but instead a lightening up. We are liberated for what's next, for this church, for our lives, for those things to which God is calling us.

Notes

¹ “Funerary Art in Puritan New England,” Wikipedia, available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funerary_art_in_Puritan_New_England (accessed April 9, 2023).

² Here are the photos of the tombstone I took that day.



³ Here is the photo.



⁴ E.E. Beardsley, “A Sermon Preached in St. Thomas’s Church, New Haven, Easter, 1873, The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Parish,” (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor, Printers, 1873), available online from Project Canterbury at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/eebeardsley/thomas1873.html> (accessed November 17, 2019).

⁵ E.E. Beardsley, “The Grateful Remembrance: An Anniversary Discourse, Delivered in St. Thomas’ Church, New Haven, Easter Sunday, 1858” (New Haven: Peck, White & Peck, 1858), available online from Project Canterbury at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/eebeardsley/grateful1858.html> or from HathiTrust at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxtav9&view=1up&seq=7> (accessed April 9, 2023).

⁶ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 499.