

With the regards of the  
Author

P 934

Railroad

A

SERMON,

The sacredness of Death is but the sacredness of Life, embalmed in memory.

PREACHED TO THE

First Independent Congregational Society of

WHEELING, VA.

On the occasion of transforming the old Burying Ground, into a site for a  
Railroad Depot, and

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST,

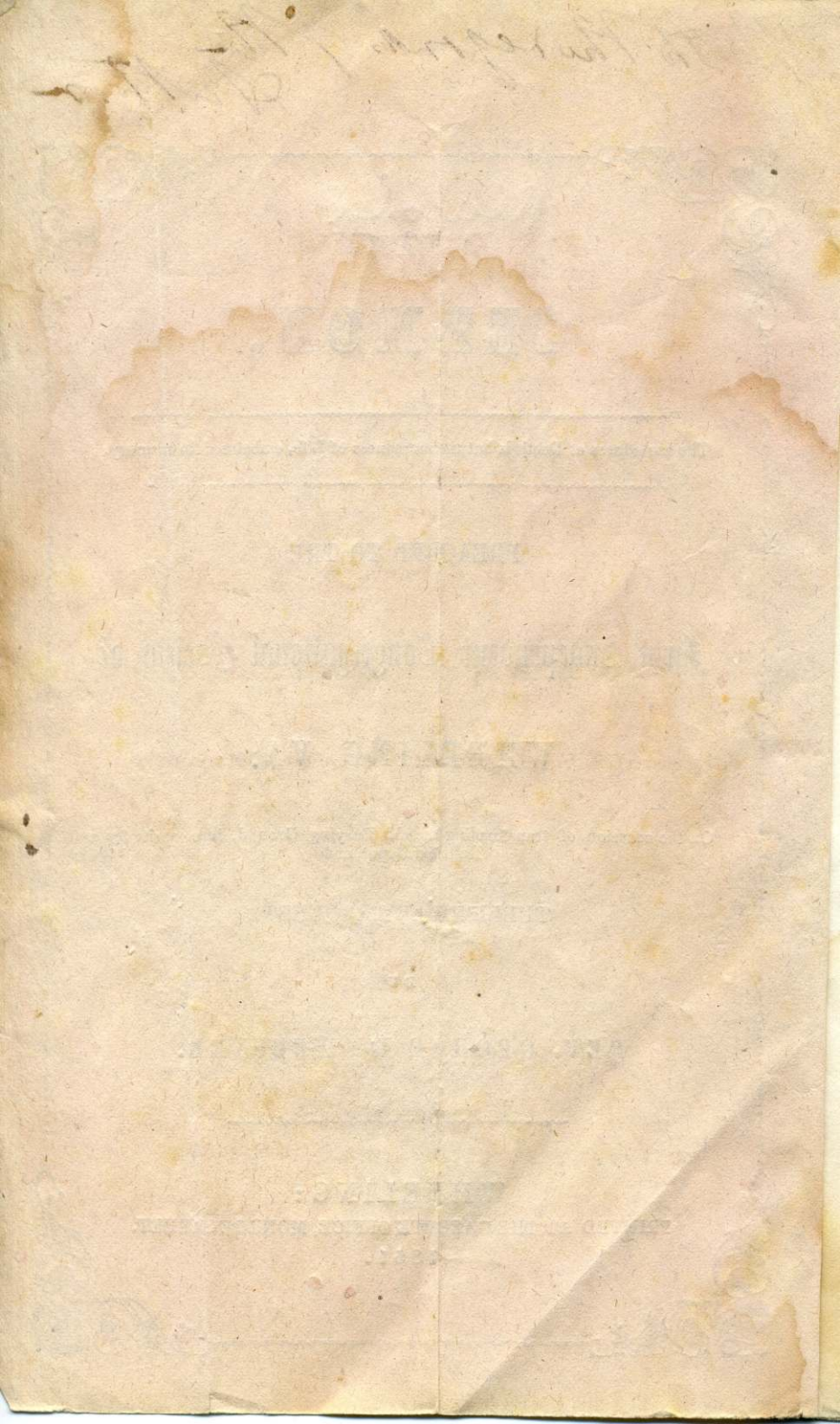
BY

REV. GEORGE W. WEBSTER.

WHEELING:

PRINTED AT THE GAZETTE OFFICE, MONROE STREET.

1851.



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**DEDICATION.**

To the citizens of Wheeling, who, by the event referred to, are peculiarly called upon to reflect on the decay of mortality, and the glory of immortality, with the desire that it may be sanctified by exalting our conception of the sacredness of daily life, this discourse is respectfully dedicated by **THE AUTHOR.**

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST,

REV. GEORGE W. WEBSTER.

WHEELING:

PRINTED AT THE GAZETTE OFFICE, CORNER STREET.

1851.

# SERMON.

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THE SACREDNESS OF DEATH IS BUT THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE RE-  
BALMED IN MEMORY.

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*"Give me a possession of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."* Gen. 23: 4.

A strange, unpleasant, and somewhat unnatural occurrence is now taking place within the precincts of our city.

The necessities of the living conflict with the repose of the dead; and we are driven to the disagreeable alternative of invading the habitations of the departed, demolishing the city of the dead, and removing the sacred dust to places more convenient for us, and more retired and suitable for them. The sacred mound of their slumbers has long been exposed. It has echoed the sound of the hammer, the foot-fall, and the engine. It has been overtaken and environed by the progress of life and business; until what was once a secluded, unmolested retreat, now stands out exposed, unprotected, unshaded, in the midst of the bustle and turmoil of life—surrounded by the shop, the mill, the school-house, the dwelling house, and disturbed by the ceaseless hum of business, the accents of thoughtless children, and the idle gaze of unmoved, if not disrespectful, spectators.

Those to whom the spot was dear on account of its containing the remains of relatives and friends, were every year growing less. It stood thus up amidst the living, not to solemnize and sanctify the duties and pleasures of life taking place around it, but rather to suffer the loss of its own sacred associations, by becoming an object of commonplace remark and of constant gaze. Under these circumstances, was it not our duty, sad and painful though it be; to remove its inhabitants to a more retired and tranquil resting place? If they could speak, would they not sanction and approve the pro-

ject already devised, and now in process of completion, respecting them? Methinks I hear them say, "Our dust is yours, not ours. We have laid it aside for a structure more beautiful and durable, 'even an heavenly.' Let the spade open our abodes, and level our city. Let the sunlight of heaven glare upon our ashes. Let the foot of curiosity tread over our heads, and the gaze of wonder fasten on our bones. A temporary disturbance is preferable to a continued exposure; and will be well repaid by that more tranquil sleep and secure repose behind yonder hill and across yonder stream. Let the wall, the column and the roof, lift their proportions over the ground once consecrated to us. O, let not our useless dust lie in the path of living interest! Bear us then away from the noise and confusion of those whose career has so quickly overtaken our former retirement, and whose dust will so soon mingle with ours. Deposit our few remains in that lone spot where over us may fall, unseen, the tear of affection, and among us, unmolested, may stray the foot of sorrow: where nought but the music of winds and waters, the carol of birds, and the perfume of flowers, may be our constant companions."

Yes! little thought those early settlers, when they set apart yonder knoll to the peaceful slumbers of the last long sleep, how soon the necessities of growing life would encroach on its repose; how soon it would be surrounded by the abodes of the living; how soon it would be wanted for the purposes of business and commerce. They dreamt not of engines, and depots and railroads. Had some suspected grandame or soothsayer predicted that, ere long, on that spot would rise a huge edifice, the centre of travel and merchandize, that that sacred mound would be levelled off for such a purpose, and their dust removed to other and serener abodes, to make way for the introduction of new and unheard of modes of travel, would she have escaped the gibbet? But so it is. Such are the wonders of progress, improvement, invention. Civilization marches on with astonishing strides. The sea of human life widens and deepens with frightful rapidity. Nothing is consecrated enough to withstand its pace. If the grave of dear ones come in its way, it must be invaded, the tomb opened, the ashes removed, the repose disturbed, the hallowed spot appropriated.

Yes! as sacred as is the resting place of the dead, it must yield to the claims of the living. Life is sacred too, as well as death. The interest, and happiness, and success of living communities are all sacred. Say not then that it is desecration, when they set aside the sacredness of the dead. Nay! it is no sacrilege. It is the divine sanctity of human progress, of living want. We wrong this daily life of ours, by not hallowing it, by making it commonplace, by separating it from the idea of beauty, sublimity and sanctity.

Shall these forms, warm and vigorous with life, yield the pain of sacredness to the cold, dark, silent grave. Shall we suffer superstition to usurp the domain of truth; fancy to triumph over reason? Is the hearthstone any less sacred than the tombstone? Has the home of domestic affection fewer hallowed associations than the tomb of the departed dear ones? Is that "old arm chair," which so often bore the weight of that same body while living; are those implements of trade his hand wielded, those streets his feet so often paced, and those familiar scenes of business and pleasure he so often frequented; are these, I ask, any less sacred than the one lone spot which now contains his mortal remains?

It is on this point that the world needs instruction. Let the occurrence we contemplate teach us this lesson. Let this event speak to us from the desk. I have before informed you of my notions and my course respecting the moral instructions to be derived from the occurrences of life, and the propriety of seizing hold of whatever is going on in society, and weaving these lessons into our pulpit services. I do so with the event now before us; and in this case no one will find fault. All concur in the suitableness of such an incident to come into the pulpit. You are willing to listen to the voices of the departed. You will gladly hear any lessons which their present disturbance inculcates. What then, candidly, is that lesson, in the present instance? What does their yielding to the claims of human business, their removal to make way for the comfort and convenience of the living, the erasure of their mound for the track of the car—what does it teach of the sacredness of the natural goings of society; this living round of labor, difficulty and necessity; this scene of workshops, plough-fields, steamboats, and railways? If these are not more sacred than graveyards, then are we committing sacrilege. If the interests of the living are not paramount to, and more sacred than, those of the dead, then are we committing outrage and injustice to both dead and living. It becomes a question of importance, as well as one of interest.

Let us inquire then, into the *nature* of that sacredness which invests the dead. What is it that hallows their ashes? What but that affection which they created while living? Is it not *life* that gives death its hallowed associations and memories? It is the memory of that living eye, that warm hand, that vigorous arm, that firm footfall; it is the ten thousand associations of the living form, voice, trade, station, that now cling around and hallow the crumbling dust. That dust was once warm with living emotion, active with coursing life-blood. It once filled the duties of some important department of human business, it once participated in the ceaseless routine of human cares and trials and pleasures; and it is fond memory still linking it with these living realities, that still consecrates that de-

clay and corruption, which else would sicken and disgust. It needs then but an analysis of the sacredness of death, to discover that it is nothing but the grandeur of life, embalmed in the amber of tears, and treasured in the urn of memory. It is life dimly seen and magnified through the drapery of recollection. It is the sober and reasonable estimate of living interest and attachment, deified by fearful uncertainty, superstitious veneration, and heart-rending bereavement.

It is often the fatal retribution we suffer for lack of serving, obeying, loving and hallowing the living and warm soul which once animated that clay. We are forced to pay to lifeless dust that grateful respect and reciprocating love which we neglected to render to the living, and loving being that once dwelt in it. Because we failed to appreciate the jewel, we thenceforth cling with distraction to the empty, decaying casket. O, this is the goad of mourning! While we possess and enjoy the child, the brother, sister, father, mother, friend, lover, husband, wife, we do not hallow them with full and continued appreciation, affection, gratitude; we do not hallow them by the strict discharge of every duty, the anticipation of every real want, the bestowment of every proper good—by living with and among them in all holiness of act, thought, and desire.

Whatever sacredness, then, invests the dead, is but a recollection—a reflection, of the sacredness of the living—an embalming and treasuring up of those reminiscences and associations, which were created in this scene of common life, which we are too apt to regard as commonplace, devoid of sacredness and necessarily irksome, trifling, unimportant. It is this daily life which I would hallow, or rather show to be holy, or rather still, teach you to make holy. This is the lesson taught you by the opening of these graves, the removal of these remains, and the appropriation of this property of the dead to the use and enjoyment of the living.

I would have you gaze upon, and take hold of, the living forms of your still present and spared dear ones, with all that solemn interest and subdued thoughtfulness, that you betray while surveying and handling the lifeless clay of the departed.

What a web of inconsistencies do we permit unnatural habits, and false associations to weave round our lives! See yonder little group crowding around that disturbed grave. The sexton's shovel is busy; the process of disinterment is going on. A second coffin is in readiness to receive and bear away the few fragments—bones, teeth, hair, and black earth—that remain of the once fair and beautiful form. A moment more, and the decayed coffin-lid re-appears. It is lifted. The treasured remains are carefully gathered and deposited in the new coffin. The mother's tears start afresh, as she examines, one by one, those dark bones, and detects in the still preserved hair and enamelled teeth, some familiar mark that memory



has treasured. Now this, in itself, is beautiful. It touches the heart of the beholder. It does honor to human nature. But to follow this mother home, and after a few hours have dried those tears, to behold her looking coldly, and fretfully, and angrily on the *living* offspring that has chanced to cross her inclinations, or exact her service, or exhaust her scanty patience—to see her perhaps vent that momentary passion in brutal, thoughtless, dangerous blows upon the sacred flesh of the living child, and to witness how unhallowed seem to her all the cares and trials of home, and maternity, and housewifery—plighted love and domestic duty:—to see this, is to see a most sad, though a most common sight.

This want of a holy respect for the living form, in connection with an almost unnatural veneration for the lifeless clay, I wish to illustrate still again.

Two men, having too freely drunken, are thrust out from the haunt of dissipation at the mercies of the cold, inclement winter night.— They separate, and seek in different directions, and with different destinies, their forlorn homes. The cold chills their already numb and misguided limbs. They cannot proceed. It is late, and no helping hand is nigh. They seek the nearest shelter. One is fortunate enough to grope his way to a stable, and a warm bed of straw saves his life. But alas! the other pillows his head on the cold stone, and the sleep of death steals over him. In the morning he lies outstretched and lifeless in the street. The earliest risers that pass that way gather round him with careful tread, silent lips and subdued reverence. The cart goes slowly and respectfully by. All that part of the city feels the shock. The spot is visited long after the body is removed. The children do not play near it, and the furious rider drives slowly by it. It is respect for the dead. It is well. Far be it from me to speak lightly of it.

Go back now to his comrade in the stable. The ostlers, roused early, find him in the dead sleep of drunkenness—in a condition, in my opinion, more worthy of tender respect than death itself: for that, on account of which respect is due to either *body*, is still an inmate of this, and not of that. But witness the far different treatment which this body receives. It is the subject of toul jests. It is rudely handled. Oaths and curses take the place of the prayers that are said over the other; and, lest suspicion rest on the character of the stable, it is early roused and tumbled into the streets. And as it reels, and trips, and stumbles, a troop of thoughtless boys insult and desecrate it; and all who pass, gaze upon it with anything but respect. There is no reverence for that living sepulchre.

Pause now! and contemplate these two scenes. See what feeble hold of society Christianity has! The spirit of Christ does not show

itself thus. Heathendom can venerate and mourn the dead as handsomely as we. It is for Christianity to perform this office for the unfortunate, the erring, and the unsightly *living*. It cannot compete with rude Paganism in its regard for the dead. I have purposely chosen an instance where the moral condition of both persons was similar. Both were intoxicated, both companions in dissipation, and known to be. Thus does blind superstition still prevail over enlightened christian principle.

Alas! what can we do to dignify and sanctify this daily life! this—which is the ideal of Chistianity; this arena on which Christ lived the hero; these common, simple duties, interests, struggles, temptations, pleasures; these sublime trifles that fill up so large a part of life, and so almost entirely shape our character and destiny! Christ came to save not only our souls, but to redeem all the appurtenances of these souls; not only to make us *new creatures*, but our daily walks, *new spheres*. Old *things* were to pass away and all *things* become new. He came to shed the beams of greatness and sacredness on every department of life, to rend the veil that usurped the holy of holies for the exclusive possession of the priesthood, and to set up the cherubim and seraphim of sanctity in every home, in every field and shop, over every profession and trade. He robbed death of terror, and the grave of superstition, and enthroned hope over the veiled future, on *purpose* that the human mind might be free to centre its present regards, capacities and opportunities on the cultivation of holiness *here*, in and upon our daily toils, vicissitudes, experience; losses, successes; wants, supplies; griefs, joys—that, unconcerned about the gloom of the grave, and with childlike faith, leaving our future in God's hands, we might here on earth create a heaven; make this earth a garden of holiness—that we might infuse into life's business so much honesty, magnanimity, mercy; endure hardship with so much resignation; overcome difficulty with so much moral courage; meet temptation with such constant victory; and deal and live with our brethren in such humility, charity, love, and look upon all things as seeing in them so plainly the hand of God that made them, that life would become divine, that a new heaven and a new earth would be wrought out, and that death would no longer be needed as an entrance to *higher* joys and occupations.

Christ came to teach us, while this earth is our habitation, and its work our principal occupation, to labor here without distraction from either past regrets, or future fears; that shielded by forgiveness from behind, and by hope from before, we might do incessant and noble battle here; that forgetful of self and regardless of consequences, we might obey and enjoy God *HERE*—lose here our physical lives in great and good enterprises, in heroic self-sacrifice for the common good.

It is by doing, here, the will of God, that we are to know of the speculative doctrines of the gospel. It is by imitating Christ here, that we are to resolve all doubts as to our acceptance with him hereafter. Direct speculation never will, and never can afford us a full and undoubted hope of future welfare. *The human soul is so constituted that it can be at ease about the future, only when it is promptly and heartily improving the present.*

If we do our duty to the living, we shall have little time to mourn the dead, and little need of mourning them. If we study the Bible faithfully to find correct rules of life and business, we shall not need to search it long for promises of future salvation. If we, every day, cultivate and enjoy the holiness which God attaches to our social relations, while unbroken by death, we shall not be overwhelmed by that same holiness, haunting us in the memory of departed affection and worth—in the *dim reflection* of that sacredness when lost, which we failed to see and admire while in our possession.

Life is the solemn thing. I care little how I die, if I can only live aright. Dying in a gradual, natural way, I may die peacefully, and to outward appearance, happily; or disease may distract me, and I may die shockingly, frantically. This is no criterion. But how have I lived? The voyage of pirates may *terminate* on tranquil seas, and that of saints in fatal storms and shoals. The *voyage* is the thing, not a few hours' sailing at its close.

Such, then, is the lesson which is taught us by our own conduct in setting aside the claims of the dead, whenever they interfere with the claims of the living. In this act we unconsciously acknowledge that life is more sacred than death. For I trust that I have shown you that "the sacredness of death is but the sacredness of life, embalmed in memory;" that it is the remembered and reflected holiness of life associated with the decaying forms of death, which invests them with such sanctity.

Suffer now a word of exhortation.

Let us ever look upon, and deal with, our living friends and kindred, our children and our parents, our husbands and our wives, with all that sense of sacredness which we should feel if we were gazing on their lifeless forms. Let us sacredly discharge every obligation to the living, as we do to the dead. Let us ever speak to, think of, deal with, one another's persons and personal interests, with that thoughtful restraint, that tender solicitude, that holy regard which we should exercise if their persons were cold and stiff in death, and these personal interests were pending between us and 'souls passed into the skies.' Then, if called to mourn their departure at all, it will be with tears of joy, and with sorrow that is itself a comfort. If you will observe this *one* rule, it will lead you

to solid character, to solid peace, to solid hope. It will afford you a rock to lean upon in life, and in death. It is this want of sacredness, attached to our daily life, intercourse, connections, to our persons, habits, dealings, that robs us of the real beauty and happiness of this stage of existence. It is what most of all should be studied, practised and enjoyed in the present age. It is, indeed, the great idea of the age.

We have long enough exalted heaven at the expense of earth; long enough deified Christ and demonized man; long enough magnified the grace of God, by enhancing the depravity of human nature; long enough lost sight of the holiness of this life, by idly speculating on the nature of the life to come; long enough exhorted one another to live with reference to death and future retribution.

Let us *now* live in view of the solemnness and sacredness of life, and for present duty and present reward. Let us dig diamonds in the earth, instead of flying kites into the clouds. It will be a poor forestalling of eternity, the neglect of time! Faithfulness over the "few things" here, will best enable us there, to rule worthily over "many."

I might make a more formal defence of the course of our citizens in the case before us; but it is not needed. If there was, at first, a feeling of repugnance, on the part of some, at the disturbance of the repose of these ashes, I believe that sober reflection has rendered the step nearly unanimous.

Nothing can more effectually mar the sacredness of the dead, than the exposure of their graves to all the glare of near and constant gaze. The grave becomes commonplace. Those who go there to meditate and weep, are disturbed by publicity—perhaps by the presence of rude sports. Abraham desired "a possession for a burying-place that he might bury his dead *out of his sight*."

Even, if the ground was not needed for an urgent use, refined christian taste, and a pure and discriminating reverence for the dead would dictate the removal of this burying-place. It must be remembered also, that we have not rudely and rashly invaded the rest of the dead. In many cases the ashes have been disturbed, only to be mourned anew. Many thoughtful countenances have hung over the opening graves, and many tears have embalmed the crumbling dust. Nor has expense been spared in procuring another resting place, where even those who participate in this enterprise expect to lay their own forms, "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," by the side of those they are there re-intering.

Let nothing I have said in proving the sacredness of life—that death derives its own sacredness *from* life—be construed into any want of tender and sacred regard on the part of your speaker, towards the dead. He attaches, by the strong bonds of memory,

gratitude, and association, all the sacredness of life to those dead forms that once moved and spoke *with* that life. A reverence for the dead is universal. It is found among the rudest people. It is the concentrated sanctity of life breaking upon the thoughtless mind, for the first time, when that life ceases. It is a natural tribute to the memory of the soul that once inhabited the now lifeless, worn out, cast off tenement. To the christian, the grave has a peculiar sacredness;—not a superstitious awe, an instinctive, mysterious dread, but a significant, enlightened and hallowed glory, an affectionate, hopeful and resigned veneration. Christ went into the dark chambers of death and left there the lamp of hope. His body was enveloped in the winding sheet, and shaded by the pall, and wept over by the eye of affection. He tasted death for us.

Blessed, then are the dead. Leave them to their long repose. The storms of life are over with them. Strife and animosity do not follow them. Their imperfections are forgotten; their errors, forgiven. No accusation is brought against them. The breath of slander falls not on their names. The bitterness of trial and calamity they taste not. They are pillowed softly in the lap of grateful memory.

“There is a calm for those who weep,  
A rest for weary pilgrims found;  
They softly lie, and sweetly sleep,  
Low in the ground.

The storm that sweeps the wintry sky,  
No more disturbs their deep repose,  
Than summer evening’s latest sigh,  
That shuts the rose.”

Adieu, then, ye fading forms! ye mouldering ashes! We hope never more to invade your sacred rest. Sleep on, sleep on in your new abode; we shall soon sleep with you! We thank you for the lesson taught us by this incident in the history of your slumbers. The bright angels that once animated you, are hovering round us. You will moulder away in long oblivion; they will live in eternal progression.

Adieu fond ashes! ADIEU!

...and association, all the members of the church of Christ, those that  
 have moved and spoken with the Lord. A revelation for  
 the dead is intended. It is found among the words of the  
 the concentrated essence of the word upon the mountain  
 mind for the first time, and a new revelation is  
 to the memory of the soul that once inhabited the body  
 were out, cast off, and removed. To the children, the words  
 called a revelation: not a supernatural, but a  
 right word, but a revelation, and a revelation, and  
 a revelation, hopeful and joyful revelation. Christ went into an  
 dark chambers of death, and he was there the lamp of hope. His  
 was enveloped in the shining light, and shaded by the light, and  
 wept over by the eye of affliction. He taught death for us.  
 Blessed, then, are the dead, those that are in their long repose.  
 The souls of the living are over with them. Gifts and ministries to  
 not allow them. Their imperfections are forgotten; their errors  
 forgiven. No accusation is brought against them. The breath of  
 heaven is not on their names. The bitterness of trial and or-  
 dinary life is not. They are allowed to live in the lap of grace,  
 in memory.

"There is a calm for those who weep,  
 A rest for every pilgrim found;  
 They softly lie, and sweetly sleep,  
 In peace in the ground.  
 The stars that guard the whiter sky,  
 The more distant their long way,  
 The nearer evening's latest light,  
 The fainter their rays."

Alas, then, as I feel myself to be travelling apace! We hope  
 never more to invade your sacred ear. Step on, step on in your  
 new abode; we shall soon be in the land! We thank you for the  
 lesson taught by this incident in the history of your chamber.  
 The bright angels that once attended you are hovering round you.  
 You will wander away in long oblivion; they will live in eternal  
 progression.  
 Adieu, then, adieu! Adieu!



