

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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An Unexpected Alleluia

The Rev. J. Gary Fulton

On a cold and wet February afternoon I strolled through an old country graveyard reclining under the naked branches of a giant oak tree, a sentinel in wintry undress, a few of her brittle brown leaves still clinging to quivering branches. The spirits were friendly that day, almost palpable as I contemplated from bits of evidence left engraved upon sandstone or marble the lives of those interred under my feet. The nineteenth-century markers were poetic, sometimes passionate, often revealing remarkably deep faith, as in a stone set by the parents of a three-month-old baby. Out of the depths of their loss they proclaimed their faith with astonishing theological insight: “Lord, she was thine and not ours.”

“How desolate our house bereft of thee,” a widow lamented. Had her husband left her with young children to feed and rear alone? How would she manage the family farm, or did her husband leave her with any resources at all to assure her survival? Would she find it necessary to take in laundry, sell home-baked pies and breads, take a job tending someone else’s house, or worse, work in someone’s tobacco fields? Were there other kin in the area who could help support this new widow? How old might she have been? There were no discernible clues on the marker to tell of her husband’s age and thus to guess at hers.

A physician’s character and devotion were extolled: “Blessed is he that considereth the poor and needy.” I imagined this caregiver making his rounds on horseback in all sorts of weather; in the hot muggy days of August and on bitter evenings as this one in February. How many times had he delivered a baby, set a broken limb, treated pneumonia, sat at the bedside of a dying patient — and all for the payment of a chicken, a piece of pork, a loaf of fresh-baked bread, or a jar of fig preserves? And how many times had this medical practitioner done those things for no payment at all, thereby earning him his reputation (and epitaph) for blessed charity.

Perhaps one woman had suffered too much in life, far from the nurture of her ancestral home, for her survivors wrote:

Asleep in Jesus far from thee
Thy kindred and their graves may be,
But thine is still a blessed sleep
From which none ever wake to weep.

What courage those settlers had to cross a vast ocean in a slow-moving ship, to travel to an uncharted land, to carve a living out of forest and swamp, to leave behind their extended families with which there could be no easy contact. How long would this woman be in the grave before siblings and friends in England could mourn her loss and pray for her soul? And what was the nature of her suffering and pain for which death would come as “blessed sleep”?

A man’s deep sorrow spilled across his wife’s marker:

Gone to sleep in Jesus my love,
My wife my bosom friend,
The object of my love;
The time has been sweet that I have spent with you,
My dear and harmless dove;
Farewell.

Sobbing and heartbroken, his friends had to restrain him from joining her in death, throwing his own body onto the coffin of his beloved as the gravediggers shoveled dirt into the stark hole where she lay in final repose. How often he crawled into a lonely bed at night and longed for the touch of her soft flesh. How often he yearned to hear her sweet voice humming a melody as she prepared a meal or, over supper, told of the day’s events. How often did he return to sit under that oak and remember the joy his wife had brought into his life, thanking God for that gift. How much he loved her then; how much he missed her now.

“Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness,” confessed the hope of one family. And there was the terse, “Gone, but not forgotten.” Perhaps the most honest and shocking was the cryptic, “As I am now so you must be; Prepare for death and follow me.”

As I wandered among the tombstones, the overall message I saw there was of profound faith and hope. I imagined family and friends following a horse-drawn hearse into the cemetery; saw in my mind’s eye a black-veiled widow standing near an open grave as her husband’s body was lowered into the chasm. Then I heard the preacher’s voice intone the ancient creed: “All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”



After serving a cluster of seven mission churches in the Diocese of East Carolina, including one Hispanic congregation, the Rev. J. Gary Fulton retired in 1999, last serving St. Thomas-Bath, the oldest existing church building in the state of North Carolina. Previously he had served congregations in Huntsville, Alabama, Grosse Pointe, Michigan and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He now paints and writes in his home in Farmville, North Carolina.