

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Easter Day, April 16, 2017
The Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

I was just saying to some people the other day at the ecumenical service at St John's Church, that Scotland is famous for a variety of things including, whisky, wet cold rainy summers, and -- I think a little unjustly -- a certain dourness of character in both person and religion. The religion I might have to concede, since the cold, dark hand of Calvinism has undoubtedly left its mark. The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, once said that Scottish religion was "The Word made flesh - made word again."

In the south of Scotland, in the Scottish Borders, there is a small country estate with a typically Scottish baronial style house called Traquair. As you approach you are faced with an impressive set of gates with two large bears holding the family's coat of arms on top of each gate post. The gates open onto a long and graceful approach to the house lined with trees; however, the gates are shut and you can't get in this way. In fact, no-one has got in that way since 1745. During the Jacobite rising of that time, Charles Edward Stuart, or Bonnie Prince Charlie as he was known, the heir of the ancient Scottish and the British Stuart line, visited Traquair during his bid to win back his father's crown. The then 5th Earl vowed that the gates would never be opened again until a Stuart once more sat upon the British throne.

The "good cause" as it was known, famously fell on Culloden Moor later that year. Supported as it was by most Episcopalians, the Episcopal Church, along with its anti-Calvinist ethos, too fell from favor and indeed became a persecuted community for some 70 years. Consequently, the Bear Gates at Traquair have remained shut ever since -- 272 years and counting. The Stuart King will never come now.

Young Tim and I did something the other week I have been meaning to do since I got here. We visited the monuments on a beautiful, clear Washington night. We walked from the Jefferson Memorial to the Washington Monument and then on down the Mall to the Lincoln Memorial. It is an impressive sight: In a way, even more impressive at night than it is during the day.

As we were walking around I couldn't help but think that 300 years ago none of it was there. The little stone house on M St is described as the oldest structure in Washington, and it was only built in 1765.

Now, I sometimes sense from what people say to me, that Americans are almost apologetic about the newness of this country. "That's really old here," people say to me, "but of course that's nothing to the age of the buildings you have across in Great Britain."

But I don't think people realize that what strikes someone like me, coming from the Old World, is not how young America is. Rather, it is the incredible achievement of it all. That this, all of it, this amazing country, could have been built in 400 years, but most of it really largely since 1776, a mere 41 years before this congregation was founded. These monuments are an impressive sight but the Washington Obelisk points much further, it points on a clear night even to the moon.

Here a king is not awaited. George III, the grandson of the Hanoverian king who won the struggle that left the Bear Gates at Traquair shut forever, lost the loyalty of men like Jefferson

and Washington, and this people determined to set forth on a new journey without a king. The Declaration of Independence is largely a list of grievances against George III but it also sets out a new vision of a New World.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Today we stand with the world before the empty tomb of another King. Not one that is awaited or rejected -- at least by us -- but one that has gone away ahead of us.

Perhaps, as we gaze on this empty hollow in the earth, some of you wonder how, or even if, what we celebrate today is possible. How can he be risen? Well, if God did not exist, then of course it would be utterly impossible. But he does exist, and if he made the sun and the stars, then of course he can do this.

Some may choose to stand and puzzle over the tomb's great emptiness, but if they do they miss the point. Jesus is not there. He is risen. While we stand scratching our heads he has gone out into all the world to touch and change and make whole the lives of men and women everywhere.

How do I know he is risen? I know because I meet him and experience his presence every day: In the daily rhythm of the prayers in the chapel here, in the piercing beauty of the music in our worship, in the humble giving of himself in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, in the drama and suffering and love I see in the lives of the people I serve with and serve.

Christ is risen, and the empty tomb is the opposite of the Bear Gates at Traquair house. They are forever shut waiting for a king who will never come. This tomb is forever open, left so by the King who has gone out to possess his Kingdom: A Kingdom made up of the hearts and minds of countless thousands of men and women across the world and down the ages.

This kingdom is the opposite of King George III's Kingdom, the one men like Jefferson and Washington and Lincoln rejected. In the risen Lord, we see crowned both life and liberty and the happiness of human beings brought back to what they were created to be.

So what are we to do this glorious Easter morning? We will sing and rejoice and be glad. We will take strength from the bread of his body and drink deeply of the wine of his new life. And we will go out from this place: Out into the world he has gone to win. A world that, despite all indications to the contrary, no longer belongs to the enemy but belongs to the one true King who has come to take back his throne, man by man, woman by woman, heart by heart.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.