

A Homily for Easter 2007

St. James' Episcopal Church
Boardman, Ohio

The Rev. Father Kelly Marshall, Rector

Wasn't the weather great last Monday? The sun was bright and shone warmly. The daffodils and forsythia were in their glory. My parents had been house bound much of the winter, so I drove to Pennsylvania to take them for a ride in the country. They wanted to visit family cemeteries. They're convinced that when they are gone, there will be no one to care for the family graves. So I took my camera and a notepad, and we made the round of cemeteries. By the end of the day, I came to realize that my ancestors back to the late 1700s all are buried within 55 miles of where my parents have lived all their lives. We ended in the Parker Presbyterian Cemetery, above the Allegheny River 70 miles north of Pittsburgh, at the grave of **Aunt Hovey**—Mary Ann (Polly) Truby Hovey. More about her in a moment.

It was a good day. As that incredible sunny weather disappeared and winter returned this week, I've been thinking about our cemetery adventure off and on. Here's something I can't get out of my head: in those old church cemeteries in western Pennsylvania, the gravestones all are facing East, towards the rising sun, towards Jerusalem.

We visited and I photographed more than two dozen graves. It was an occasion for my parents once again to tell me the stories. I think I was hearing some of those stories for the first time. But it's Aunt Polly Hovey's story that stands out. She was a survivor. I think she was a brave and a tough woman. She was born a British citizen in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1775; and she died three years after her "grandsons" and nephews fought for the Union in the Civil War. She survived capture by the Seneca Indians when she was four years old. She survived two husbands and outlived six siblings. In 1806, she made her way from western Pennsylvania to Lancaster, Ohio, to retrieve her Marshall and Rohrer nephews and nieces, whose parents both had died that summer on the frontier. She took some of them home to Pennsylvania to rear them as her own. Others, she cared for by getting them to Uncles and Aunts who would give them a home. Aunt Hovey and her sister's children toughed it out in a log house on the high west bluff of the Allegheny River, between Parker and Foxburg. She and her family were among the few white people for miles around, in that wilderness, along that beautiful river. Polly lived to see great-grandchildren. She was a survivor.

And when she died, the Presbyterians placed her body in the ground facing East—looking across the valley to the hill opposite the Allegheny, where for 140 years now the sun has risen every morning to shine on her gravestone. They buried her facing Jerusalem.

Deep in the hearts of our Christian ancestors in these hills and valleys was *the hope and expectation of Easter*. The belief that on the Last Great Day—the Day of Resurrection—they and their loved ones would rise from the dead, facing the Rising Sun. Facing Jerusalem—for the Risen Jesus, they had been told, would come again to Jerusalem—to Jerusalem, where he was executed. And when **they** rose from the dead, they would see the King in his beauty. “The King shall come when morning dawns, and light triumphant breaks.” Some of them had sung that Advent hymn. They all knew the promise. They had kept Easter, year by year. And when they buried their dead, they remembered. **They energized the harshness of their grief in this one highly symbolic action: they buried them facing East.**

As the years go by, my friends, and you and I keep Easter together—remember! Remember the witness and the hope of our Christian ancestors. It’s all about Easter. And never forget the power of kindling New Light at Easter. By this great symbol, we each are reminded that in spite of the darkness of Friday’s horrid death, new light always is kindled: the Light of Christ. We lit it here last night--the new fire--and it burns now on all the candles. Remember! Its light reminds us that through and beyond the harshness of death, *God is at work to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine*. We see the new light of Easter, and we remember that Jesus is the Light of the world.

I heard Molly last night at the Great Vigil read these words from Ezekiel: *“Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people . . . And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live . . . then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”*

One day, I expect to see Aunt Hovey and all those ancestors, whose graves my parents showed me this week—whose graves God shall have opened at the Last Day. Buried facing East, with the hope of new life, they remind us that, through a Grand and Glorious Mystery, **it’s all about Easter.**

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



See <http://one-huge-family.com/id23.html> for more about Aunt Hovey.