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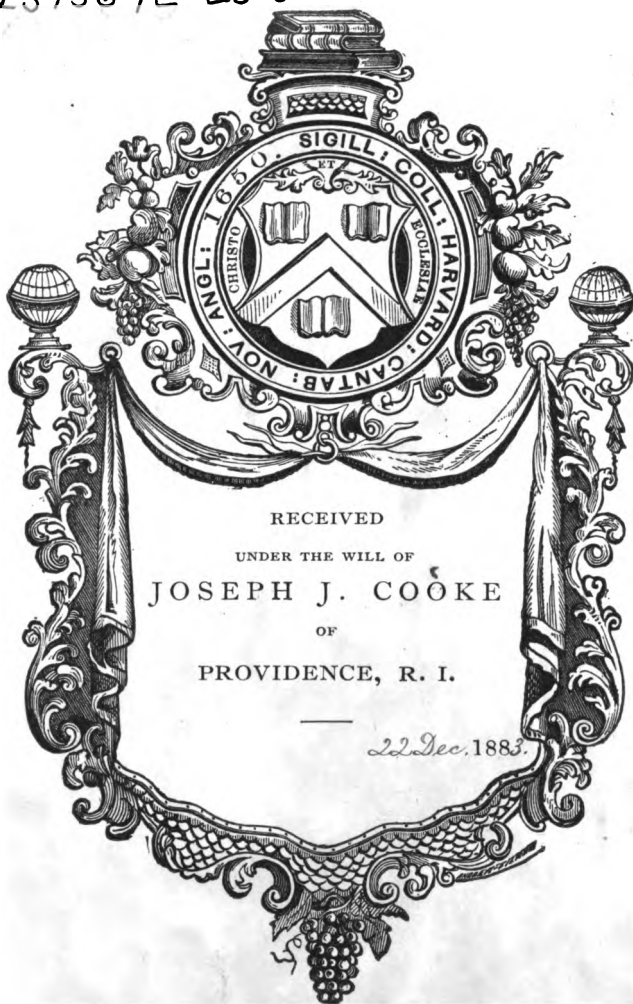
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S E R M O N
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A

SERMON

PREACHED ON

SABBATH AFTERNOON, AUGUST 21, 1853,

IN CONNECTION WITH

THE FUNERAL SOLEMNITIES

OF

JOHN BOARDMAN,

RULING ELDER

IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ALBANY.

Buell
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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THIS SERMON IS PRINTED BY THE UNITED REQUEST OF THE BEREAVED
FAMILY AND THE SESSION OF THE CHURCH.

TO
MY CLASSMATE AND FRIEND,
THE
REVEREND GEORGE S. BOARDMAN,
THIS TRIBUTE
TO HIS FATHER'S CHERISHED MEMORY,
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED:

FUNERAL SERMON.

PROVERBS XVI: 31.

The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.

We have here a most consolatory truth presented with great rhetorical beauty. *The hoary head*—what an impressive emblem of venerable old age! It tells of a long course of years—of a large and varied experience—of the near approach of death. *If it be found in the way of righteousness*—that is, the way in which God originally placed his creature, man, giving him at once the ability and the disposition to walk in it—the way of obedience to the divine precepts and conformity to the divine character—the way to which, since man has become a wanderer from God, it is the design of the gracious economy to recover him, by repentance of sin and faith

in a Redeemer. *A crown of glory*—a crown is significant of high honour; but a crown *of glory* marks a yet nobler distinction. We have no higher idea of the authority and dignity to which the redeemed in Heaven are advanced, than is conveyed to us by this lofty similitude. The great truth then, which we find amidst this beautiful imagery, like a diamond set in gold, is this—that *peculiar honour attaches to a Christian old age*.

The text may be considered as applicable to every case of old age in which we can discover in any degree the actings of a living faith; not excepting those who are born into the kingdom after they have passed into the twilight of life. But it is especially applicable to those whose religion has been proved by the constant growth of many years; whose Christian character has been matured by a long course of discipline and exercise—such are eminent examples of the truth that the hoary head, found in the way of righteousness, is a crown of glory.

Do you ask for the elements of that honour which pertains to a Christian old age, especially where it crowns a long life devoted to

the service of God? Mark then the protracted period in which such persons have been learners in the school of Christ; the abundant opportunities they have had of gaining a knowledge of his character and will, and testing his love and faithfulness; and their extended and varied experience, modified by the ever-changing circumstances of their earthly condition. Mark too the high attainments they have made in knowledge and piety; how familiar they are with God's truth; how submissive they are to God's will; how manifestly the prevailing tendencies of their spirit are upward; how their whole life is an epistle known and read of all men; how ready they are to receive their dismissal from this scene of their pilgrimage. Mark yet again the great amount of good which they have accomplished—good to the bodies and the souls of men; good to many whom they never saw in the flesh, and who never knew them as their benefactors; good that will remain on earth to witness for them after they are gone, and a record of which will be produced in the judgment to justify the plaudit,—“Well done, good and faithful

servants.” And recollect, finally, that they are now lingering on the borders of Heaven, almost within sight of the thrones they are to occupy, and within hearing of the songs in which they are to join; and the very infirmities that oppress them, point away to that world from which all that is mortal and sinful shall be forever excluded. And where shall we look for real nobility, for truly valuable distinction, if not in circumstances like these? Is not he justly regarded honourable who, by patient continuance in well doing through a long life, in connection with God’s abounding grace, has risen to a noble Christian stature, and is brought near to the possession of a glorious reward? Is not the hoary head, found in the way of righteousness, a crown of glory?

Yes, the aged Christian *is* a truly honourable character. I care not for the obscurity of his earthly condition—I care not of how little account he may be in the view of the world—I justify myself by the highest authority in the universe, in pronouncing him essentially worthy of all honour. And thus all good men regard him—aye, and wicked men too;

for even though they may pass him by unheeded, or avoid his society, or ridicule his infirmities, they secretly reverence his character. All, all who come within the range of his example, render at least a silent testimony to the lustre of his virtues and the value of his prospects.

I shall not extend my remarks in illustration of the truth contained in our text. My design was simply to glance at it, as forming an appropriate introduction to some brief notices of the life and character of the venerable man, whose funeral obsequies we join with the accustomed services of the sanctuary. I am sure I need not apologize for so far varying from my ordinary course as to present this departed patriarch, this veteran in the Christian life, before you, somewhat in detail. Not only was he the senior elder of our own church, but the oldest in any Presbyterian church in this city—I suspect the oldest within the bounds of the Presbytery of Albany. His official relation to the church, therefore, especially when considered in connection with his advanced age, forbids that we should suffer him to pass away to his glo-

rious home, without some attempt on our part to call up the elements of his extraordinary worth.

Our departed friend was born in Wethersfield, Connecticut, on the 17th of November, 1770. His parents sustained an excellent Christian character, and, both by precept and example, endeavoured to form their children to habits of virtue and piety. One of the events which he was accustomed to relate, as having most deeply impressed his mind during his childhood, was the murder of the Beadle family in Wethersfield—one of the most fearful tragedies to be found in American history. Mr. Boardman, as a child, knew them all well; he was a playmate of the murdered children; he saw the whole family in their blood, and followed them to their graves; and, within a very recent period, he has written out from recollection, a minute and highly interesting account of the whole transaction.

At the age of seventeen he was apprenticed to a trade; and the next year he went to Georgia, and two years after, to the West Indies, to *work* at his trade; and, though not

at that time particularly given to serious reflection, such was the general influence of his Christian education, that he was not a little shocked and disgusted by the various forms of vice which came under his eye. At the age of twenty-one he passed a winter in North Carolina; and shortly after that—in the spring of 1792, he came to this city, where he has spent the residue of his life.

During the period of his minority, Mr. Boardman was the subject of some severe afflictions, and some remarkable deliverances. Death made distressing inroads upon his family; and he was himself, in one or two instances, marvellously preserved, in the midst of the most imminent danger; but neither bereavements nor preservations seem to have fixed his purpose to enter at once upon the religious life. At length, in the year 1793, he was surprized by the intelligence of his father's death; and this, aided by his somewhat solitary condition, as well as by the pious counsels of an old Scotch lady in whose house he lived, was the means which the Spirit of God used in bringing him to receive Christianity as a thing of life

and power. Not long after this he made a public profession of his faith by connecting himself with the First Presbyterian Church in this city, then under the pastoral care of the Rev. John McDonald.

In the year 1805 Mr. Boardman was elected an elder in the First Church; and he continued in this relation to it, discharging his official duties, as I am assured by one of his surviving contemporaries, with most exemplary fidelity, till 1815, when he was induced to engage in the then new enterprize of establishing this church. He was chosen one of its elders, at its organization; and he has survived several years the last of his original associates in the office. How holily, justly and unblamably he has behaved himself among you in this capacity, ye are witnesses and God also; and so too, no doubt, are many who once walked in the light of his example, but have preceded him in their entrance into rest.

Mr. Boardman, being blessed with a firm constitution, and always strictly temperate as well as active in his habits, had, as might be expected, a more than commonly vigorous

old age. Within a year or two, however, he has been the subject of a severe rheumatic affection that has rendered exercise difficult and painful to him; and his hearing at the same time has been becoming constantly more imperfect. Still he has never lost his wonted cheerfulness; and until within a very recent period, he has rarely been absent from any public service either in the church or the lecture room. In one of the last conversations that I had with him, he stated to me the remarkable fact that he had borne a part in every communion service held in this church until the last; and that in one instance only was he detained from that service, during his connection with the First Church, and *that* in consequence of a severe illness.

We have felt, for some months, that our venerable friend was fast approaching a better world; but it is only within the last two or three weeks that his decline has been so rapid as to lead us to expect his almost immediate departure. During this period, as well as frequently before, I have had conversations with him, which have served to illustrate

remarkably the maturity of his Christian graces, as well as his strong confidence that he should finish his course with joy. On one of these occasions, I remarked to him that he could doubtless anticipate his departure with great composure; and he replied promptly—"Yes, I trust all is right in respect to the future—at any rate I have no fears;" and in a moment after, he added with a faltering voice, and an expression of countenance that imprinted itself indelibly on my memory—"I have had such manifestations of God's loving kindness lately, as I have not felt free to speak of, and as it would be impossible for me to describe." About a week since, his mind began occasionally to wander; and very soon his utterances became entirely incoherent; but it was manifest that his faith had not lost its hold of the Redeemer, even when his faculties could only partially perform their office; and so long as he could speak, there were evidently the outgoings of a spirit of devotion. It was the habit of his soul to pray; and that habit remained till the last gleam of consciousness was gone. When his children looked on and saw

that his lips had uttered their last prayer, could they feel a single doubt that his habit of devotion was in the act of being renewed in the thanksgivings and hallelujahs of Heaven?

I have no fear of being charged with exaggeration, when I say that the piety of this man of God was of no ordinary type; and I am sure that I shall only meet a reasonable expectation, in glancing at some of the more distinctive features of his Christian character. I cannot forget that I am speaking in the presence of his remains; and *that*, as well as other considerations, will make me cautious not to offend against either truth or delicacy by any overwrought representations.

The first thing that strikes me in thinking of the character of our revered friend, is its remarkable inoffensiveness; and though this is not one of the most imposing traits, it is certainly one of the most essential to a Christian's usefulness. There are some men of whose activity you cannot complain—of whose general good intentions and good feelings you cannot complain,—who yet, by an indiscreet and incautious manner, fail, in a

great degree, to accomplish the good at which they aim, and of which they are really capable. It was not so with the man whom we lament—I cannot remember an instance in which he has seemed to me to fall into this error. The duty of reproof—one of the most difficult duties that devolve upon an officer in the church, he always performed with meekness and tenderness; and even where his efforts in this way did not produce reformation, they were still received with respect and good will. I doubt whether you can find an individual who even suspects that he ever received the least injury from him in regard to any of his interests, unless it were undesigned; and if such cases have occurred, I am confident that he has promptly, voluntarily, cheerfully, made reparation.

It must be acknowledged that there is a sort of inoffensiveness that is closely allied to timidity, irresolution, or indolence—the man is inoffensive because he scarcely comes in contact with human society—you cannot say that he does much positive harm; but neither can you say that he does any positive good. There was nothing like this in Mr.

Boardman's character; for if he was distinguished for any thing, it was for his Christian zeal and energy. Like his great Master, he was always about his Father's business; and though industriously engaged in a secular calling, he never wanted time for his strictly religious duties—whether they had respect more immediately to himself, his fellow men, or his God. His activity has indeed latterly been somewhat abated by the inroads of age; but it was impossible to converse with him, even to the last, without perceiving that his heart was as full of zeal as ever, and that, but for physical debility, his Christian labours would have been continued with the vigour of his earlier years.

He was distinguished also, even among good men, for his conscientiousness and integrity. When he had settled the question—"What is right?"—he had disposed of all difficulties in regard to his course of action. I remember his telling me, in a recent conversation, of the struggle and subsequent satisfaction which he had, in dissolving his connexion with the First church, and identifying himself with the new enterprize. His

attachment to that church had been the growth of all the previous years of his religious life. With his brethren of the eldership he had always lived in the utmost harmony and affection; and he and they were mutually reluctant to yield to the idea of a separation. The question of duty, however, urged itself upon him, and he must dispose of it in the fear of God, and with reference to his final account. The session held a meeting on a certain evening, with a view to confer on the subject, and ask counsel of the Father of lights. He was present, but scarcely opened his lips; and he left the meeting with his spirit bowed under a burden of suspense and anxiety. Before the dawn of the morning, however, his mind was relieved, and he was fixed in the purpose to cast in his lot with the brethren who were about to form the new church. From that hour he never doubted that he had chosen the path which Providence marked out for him; nor did he ever cease to look with delight to this place—to use his own favourite language—as his “spiritual home.” At one period of his life, when, by his persevering

industry, he had placed himself and his family in easy worldly circumstances, he was suddenly, and without any fault of his own, unless it were an incautious exercise of the spirit of accommodation, plunged into the deepest pecuniary embarrassment. His creditors, who regarded his character with respect, and his misfortunes with compassion, generously offered to cancel his obligations in consideration of his paying what his circumstances would then warrant; but he assured them that, though their kindness might accept less, he never should rest till he had paid the uttermost farthing; and if God spared his life and health, he doubted not that his purpose would be accomplished. It *was* accomplished—he lived to see the day when he owed no man any thing; and from the manner in which I have more than once heard him advert to it, I doubt not that it formed one of the happiest recollections of his old age.

Mr. Boardman gave numerous and decisive indications of an eminently spiritual mind. He was singularly observant of the dispensations of Providence. His own life

had been marked by not a few of a very striking character; and no exercise seemed more grateful to him than calling up these events in devout recollection. It never cost him the least effort to converse upon religious subjects—it was like the gushing forth of a full fountain. You could not feel a doubt, as you listened to him, that he was talking about his dearest interests—that his treasure was in Heaven, and his heart was there also. He had no artificial or sanctimonious airs; but there was a winning cheerfulness that showed the workings of a peaceful and benevolent spirit, while it created an atmosphere around him which it was a luxury to breathe. But for nothing was he more remarkable than his relish for the direct duties of devotion. Who ever saw his place vacant in the sanctuary, without feeling assured either that he was absent from home, or was kept away by some cause beyond his control? Who ever expected to miss him from the prayer meeting or the weekly lecture, no matter who else might be absent? Who ever heard him alledge the multiplicity of his worldly engagements, even in his most

hurried seasons, as a reason why he must turn his back upon any of the stated weekly services of the church? And it was not in publick only, but especially in private, that he delighted in communion with God. I have heard him say that he had often great religious enjoyment at night in his dreams; and he accounted for it—I doubt not justly—from the fact that, however much his mind might have been distracted by the cares of the day, his last waking thoughts were always fixed upon God.

There are various other traits of his character that occur to me, upon which I have not time to dwell. I might speak of his humility, which revolted at the idea of self-glorying, and recognized a Divine agency in whatever good he was enabled to accomplish. I might speak of his contentment with his lot; of his never failing trust in the Divine Providence; of the cheerful serenity with which I have seen him more than once bowing before God in the furnace. I might speak of his grateful reception of favours at the hands of his fellow men, as well as of his God; of his warm acknowledgments of even the

brief visits that his friends paid to him in his last days. I might speak of the large measure of Christian charity and forbearance which he exercised towards others; of his unwillingness to circulate or credit an evil report; of his disposition to put the most favourable construction upon dubious actions. But the only remaining feature of his character to which I can advert, (and indeed it is the crowning attribute,) is its eminent consistency. There were in it no unsightly excrescences that we wished to remove; nothing that would lead us to say—"But for that single defect, he might have been an eminently useful man." There are those whose Christian life is a mere fever and ague—an alternation between a dead calm and the fury of a whirlwind. They can gird themselves for some great religious exigency—a revival for instance; but it is a matter of special effort, and their zeal expends itself with the occasion that calls it forth. But I can truly say that I never conversed with our departed friend, when he did not seem to be in a frame suited to a revival; and I can say as truly that, with all his evangelical fervour, I have

never discovered in him any erratic or fanatical tendency. His character was a beautiful compound of zeal and prudence, faith and works, devotion and charity. He certainly was not without the common infirmities of humanity, and he bore about with him to the last the body of sin and death; but a more happily balanced Christian character—a more complete assemblage of shining Christian graces, we can hardly expect to find, in this world of acknowledged imperfection.

I should be unfaithful to my own sense of personal obligation, if I were not to connect with this brief notice of his character a distinct and grateful testimony to the considerate kindness with which he has uniformly treated me, during the whole period of my connexion with this church. I have always found him a true and earnest friend. He has come to me with a heart overflowing with sympathy in the hour of my sorrow. He has shown himself ready to co-operate with me in every good work. He has often met me with an encouraging word in times when the ways of Zion have mourned. I have

felt that I could lean upon him with strong confidence; and he never disappointed me. And if those who have been so happily associated with him in the eldership, were to render *their* testimony, sure I am that they would tell you with delight that we have all found him a faithful friend, and an efficient fellow worker unto the kingdom of God.

Brethren, what a character is that which has now received its finishing touch! What a life that in which such a character has been formed! What a death that in which such a life has found its close! What an eternity that of which such a death must be the harbinger! As I look down upon the coffin of the venerable saint, the past, the present, and the future, each rises up before me, witnessing to his fidelity on the one hand, and to God's abounding goodness and grace on the other. I go back eighty years and more, and stop beside the cradle in which he was rocked; and there I hear the accents of devotion in the gentle breathings of maternal love. I observe the developments of his childhood, and every thing looks auspicious—his home is a house of prayer; the

domestic influences are all in favour of virtue and piety; he has serious thoughts concerning the future; and he sometimes kneels down and asks God to give him a renovated heart. One of his brothers, and then another, finds an ocean grave—in each case he feels the bereavement keenly, but as yet he sheds no tears of contrition for his sins. The time arrives when he must look out for his own subsistence; and now he is a sojourner far away from the favoured spot where his early years have been passed, and surrounded with influences fitted only to corrupt and destroy; but by God's grace, he is kept out of the tempter's hands. I behold him, when the fulness of time for the new creating work to be performed on his heart has come—a message that his father is dead reaches him, and God's Holy Spirit comes in it—consolation under his bereavement is identified with a sense of the forgiveness of sin—he becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus—his path is destined to shine brighter and brighter till it brings him into the presence of God and the Lamb. I mark his progress by the new monuments of Christian

zeal and faithfulness that are constantly rising up behind him. I follow him round in his visits to this world's poor, and hear him discourse to them of the treasures in Heaven. I see him sitting down among the tenants of the jail, to endeavour to make them penitent for their transgressions, and look to the blood that cleanseth from all sin. He has stopped at the house of mourning, and what a comforter is he there! He has stopped at the bedside of the dying, and how earnestly he pleads for the departing spirit! He is conversing with a man in the street; and as I pass him, I hear some word that tells me that he is speaking to that man of the great salvation. At length he reaches the period when the grasshopper becomes a burden; and I know it cannot be long before the silver cord will be loosed. But the ardour of his good affections is proof against even the chilling influence of old age. I never meet him but he is evidently looking upward; and sometimes when we speak of the coming rest and joy, his face takes on a smile which seems like some bright reflection from the third Heavens. I see him sitting by my side

in the lecture room with those who assemble there to pray, even when his infirmities are such that he cannot walk thither, except as he leans on the arm of a friend. At length the communion season comes, and for the first time he is not with us—his absence is the signal that he is nearly ready to join the communion of Heaven. And now little else remains but the putting off of the earthly tabernacle; and that is a process which the happy old man dreads not; for he knows that the building of God will succeed. I go to his bed-side from time to time, and hear him testify of his Redeemer's grace and power and faithfulness, until his lips cease to move. I can look calmly upon the lethargic process in which death is doing its work, because I know that, in this case, peace and glory hang on the destroyer's footsteps. I walk abroad now, and the testimonies to his exalted worth crowd upon me from every side, and I can respond heartily, gratefully, to them all. I think of him to-day as spending his first Sabbath with the angels; and, millions of ages hence, he will still be their companion in purity, in service and in bliss.

Is it not my privilege, then, to say to you who have come to the house of God this afternoon as mourners, "Let not your hearts be troubled;" for there is a bright side to this dispensation, which is worthy to be contemplated with joy and praise. If you, the bereaved children, are oppressed by a sense of your loss, remember that God has dealt mercifully with you, in sparing your excellent father so many years; that you have enjoyed his presence and counsels and prayers almost to the extreme point of mortal existence. Thank God that you have had such a father, to give early direction to your minds, and have had him so long, to edify you by his Christian example. Thank God that your father has bequeathed to you the richest of all legacies, in a pure and elevated Christian character; and that there is nothing in the history of his life over which even filial love could wish to draw a veil. Thank God that a multitude of hearts are beating, at this moment, in harmony with your own, to a sense of his exalted worth; that in this funeral solemnity we only celebrate the entrance of an aged saint upon his eternal rest, and

lay away the corruptible body to be watched over, during its sepulchral slumber, by Him who hath declared Himself the Resurrection and the Life. Truly ye are privileged mourners—not more worthy of sympathy than congratulation. Still walk in the light of your father's example, and his God^d will be your God forever and ever.

Next to the immediate family of our departed friend, the surviving members of the eldership may be supposed to feel this bereavement most deeply. The majority of those who now hold this office, have not been associated with him in the days of his full vigour and usefulness; but ye have all been witnesses of his fidelity to both his private and official Christian obligations; ye have felt strengthened and encouraged by his presence and his prayers; and now ye may well mourn that ye shall see his face no more. May you and I experience a quickening influence from his death, even more than we have from his life. May his mantle be reverently preserved in this church, resting on all the successive generations of its elders, till the church itself shall be merged

in the general assembly and church of the first born.

I see around me here and there one whose hoary head marks him as making his passage through the vale of age. For many, many years, ye have been fellow travellers with the father who is now gone, and ye cannot be far behind him in closing your journey. Are you prepared to make such a close as he has made? Are you sure that your anchor is cast within the veil? Do you possess that temper which we have a right to expect in those who are standing on the margin of Heaven? Oh let the spirit of God, speaking to you through the passing scene, have a reverent and solemn hearing! Take lessons of heavenly wisdom here at your brother's coffin. Learn that the great secret of dying well is to live well. Learn that death has no terrors to the man who hath made his calling and election sure. Learn that your only safety, amidst the decays of nature, is in being habitually ready to exchange the infirmities of age for the vigour of immortality.

Brethren and friends, accustomed to worship in this house, suffer me to remind you

that there comes to us all through these funeral solemnities, a message of impressive and monitory import. The man whose remains occupy that coffin, had reached his maturity long before this church was established. He superintended the building of this house—he assisted in laying its foundation and lifting the top-stone to its place. He was active, too, in establishing this spiritual building; and we have always reckoned him among not only its ornaments, but its pillars. Some who were associated with him in a part of his early labours, still survive—may God cause *their* latter end to be even like his—but of the original *officers* of the church he is the last—several of his associates, and a pastor whom he loved and honoured, went before him; but he has at length followed in their upward track. Is it so, then, that the last link in the chain which bound the eldership of the former generation with the eldership of the present, is broken; and that only a few remain who were associated with our departed friend in the erection of this edifice, and the establishment of this society! Verily we are all in a current that

is sweeping onward to eternity. During the twenty-four years (for the present week completes twenty-four) that I have ministered here, what a mighty contribution has this congregation made to the world invisible! To the inquiry—"The fathers, where are they?"—a voice from the tomb answers—"Here, saying to corruption, thou art my father, and to the worm, thou art my mother and my sister"—a voice from the region of spirits answers—"Here, mingling in those realities which used to be discoursed upon in the sanctuary, but which cannot be suitably appreciated till they are seen and felt on this side the veil." But it is with the living, and not the dead, that I am now concerned. I charge you, then, to set yourselves earnestly to life's great work, however you may have hitherto neglected it. If the Christian walk, the pious counsels and earnest prayers of this departed saint, have appealed to you in vain, God grant that there may be a power in his death which you shall not be able to withstand. May the spirit which he has exemplified, survive him in the humility and gratitude and faith of a thousand hearts.

May the prayers which he has offered, be answered in the descent of a quickening and sanctifying influence, that shall react on the thanksgivings of the ransomed. Let the memory of this just man be blessed—let it remain as a sacred deposit with the next generation. And now we will go and lay his body where nature takes on some of her brightest and loveliest aspects;* and in the sacred stillness of the Sabbath evening, as well as in the beauty and grandeur of the surrounding scene, we will recognize sweet emblems of the rest and the glory into which his spirit has passed.

*Mr. Boardman's remains were interred in the Albany Rural Cemetery.

