

“The Sweetest Sermon I’ve Ever Heard in My Life”: The 180th Anniversary of Joseph Smith’s 16 April 1843 Easter Sunday Sermon

I have labored hard & sought evry way to try to prepare this people to comprehend the things that God is unfolding to me In speaking of the resurrection I would say that God hath shown unto me a vission of the resurrection of the dead & I saw the graves open & the saints as they arose took each other by the hand even before they got up or while getting up & great Joy & glory rested upon them. (Wilford Woodruff, Diary, 16 April 1843, reproduced as in the original).

We have no other accounts of the Prophet Joseph specifically mentioning that he had received a vision of the resurrection except in the following two detailed accounts of his Easter Sunday sermon.

Willard Richards, an apostle of Jesus Christ—as John and Matthew in the New Testament—faithfully kept summaries of Joseph Smith’s activities in the official Joseph Smith diary. It included abstracts of his sermons, notices of his business and spiritual meetings, as well as taking dictation of

his correspondence, drafting legal papers, priesthood records, and all other secretarial duties. Arguably, he was the person closest to the Prophet than any other person in Nauvoo. His service began in 1841 (after his British Mission with others of the Apostles) and up until the day of the Martyrdom when he took time-stamped notes of the important events of the last day of the Prophet’s life. Other than several months in 1842—when he took a leave of absence to be with his wife in New England due to her chronic illness—he

was always at Joseph’s side—day and night as required.

While he knew shorthand, his proficiency was limited. His notes were always fragments of sentences. Nonetheless, his account of this sermon is twice as long as Wilford Woodruff’s sermon summary. They are two witnesses of this glorious sermon. William Clayton provided a one sentence note.

Willard’s older sister, Rhoda, wrote in her diary that day: Willard “says he had heard the sweetest sermon from Joseph he ever heard in his life.”

The Only Known Detailed Accounts of Joseph’s Vision of the Resurrection

Joseph Smith Diary, kept by Willard Richards

Almost all who have fallen in these last days in the Church have fallen in a strange land. This is a strange land to those who have come from a distance. We should cultivate sympathy for the afflicted among us. If there is a place on earth where men should cultivate the spirit and pour in the oil and wine in the bosoms of the afflicted, it is in this place; and this spirit is manifest here; and although a stranger and afflicted when he arrives, he finds a brother and a friend ready to administer to his necessities.

I would esteem it one of the greatest blessings, if I am to be afflicted in this world, to have my lot cast where I can find brothers and friends all around me. But this is not the thing I referred to: it is to have the privilege of having our dead buried on the land where God has appointed to gather His Saints together, and where there will be none but Saints, where they may have the privilege of laying their bodies where the Son of Man will make His appearance, and where they may hear the sound of the trump that shall call them forth to behold Him, that in the morn of the resurrection they may come forth in a body, and come up out of their graves and strike hands immediately in eternal glory and felicity, rather than be scattered thousands of miles apart. There is something good and sacred to me in this thing. The place where a man is buried is sacred to me. This subject is made mention of in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures. Even to the aborigines of this land, the burying places of their fathers are more sacred than anything else.

When I heard of the death of our beloved Brother Barnes, it would not have affected me so much, if I had the opportunity of burying him in the land of Zion.

I believe those who have buried their friends here, their condition is enviable. Look at Jacob and Joseph in Egypt, how they required their friends to bury them in the tomb of their fathers. See the expense which attended the embalming and the going up of the great company to the burial.

It has always been considered a great calamity not to obtain an honorable burial: and one of the greatest curses the ancient prophets could put on any man, was that he should go without a burial.

I have said, Father, I desire to die here among the Saints. But if this is not Thy will, and I go hence and die, wilt Thou find some kind friend to bring my body back, and gather my friends who have fallen in foreign lands, and bring them up hither, that we may all lie together.

I will tell you what I want. If tomorrow I shall be called to lie in yonder tomb, in the morning of the resurrection let me strike hands with my father, and cry, “My father,” and he will say, “My son, my son,” as soon as the rock rends and before we come out of our graves.

And may we contemplate these things so? Yes, if we learn how to live and how to die. When we lie down we contemplate how we may rise in the morning; and it is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other’s embrace and renew their conversation.

Would you think it strange if I relate what I have seen in vision in relation to this interesting theme? Those who have died in Jesus Christ may expect to enter into all that fruition of joy when they come forth, which they possessed or anticipated here.

So plain was the vision, that I actually saw men, before they had ascended from the tomb, as though they were getting up

slowly. They took each other by the hand and said to each other, "My father, my son, my mother, my daughter, my brother, my sister." And when the voice calls for the dead to arise, suppose I am laid by the side of my father, what would be the first joy of my heart? To meet my father, my mother, my brother, my sister; and when they are by my side, I embrace them and they me.

It is my meditation all the day, and more than my meat and drink, to know how I shall make the Saints of God comprehend the visions that roll like an overflowing surge before my mind.

Oh! how I would delight to bring before you things which you never thought of! But poverty and the cares of the world prevent. But I am glad I have the privilege of communicating to you some things which, if grasped closely, will be a help to you when earthquakes bellow, the clouds gather, the lightnings flash, and the storms are ready to burst upon you like peals of thunder. Lay hold of these things and let not your knees or joints tremble, nor your hearts faint; and then what can earthquakes, wars and tornadoes do? Nothing. All your losses will be made up to you in the resurrection, provided you continue faithful. By the vision of the Almighty I have seen it.

More painful to me are the thoughts of annihilation than death. If I have no expectation of seeing my father, mother, brothers, sisters and friends again, my heart would burst in a moment, and I should go down to my grave.

The expectation of seeing my friends in the morning of the resurrection cheers my soul and makes me bear up against the evils of life. It is like their taking a long journey, and on their return we meet them with increased joy.

God has revealed His Son from the heavens and the doctrine of the resurrection also; and we have a knowledge that those we bury here God will bring up again, clothed upon and quickened by the Spirit of the great God; and what mattereth it whether we lay them down, or we lay down with them when we can keep them no longer? Let these truths sink down in our hearts, that we may even here begin to enjoy that which shall be in full hereafter.

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to Almighty God, that rays of light begin to burst forth upon us even now. I cannot find words in which to express myself. I am not learned, but I have as good feelings as any man.

O that I had the language of the archangel to express my feelings once to my friends! But I never expect to in this life. When others rejoice, I rejoice; when they mourn, I mourn.

To Marcellus Bates let me administer comfort. You shall soon have the company of your companion in a world of glory, and the friends of Brother Barnes and all the Saints who are mourning. This has been a warning voice to us all to be sober and diligent and lay aside mirth, vanity and folly, and to be prepared to die tomorrow" (*History of the Church*, 5:360–63; see also, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 182–90).

Wilford Woodruff Diary

President J. Smith Addressed the assembly of the saints at the temple of the Lord upon the subject of the saints death burial & resurrection of the saints. He had been requested to preach a funeral sermon by several persons who had died lost friends & he had Just Received information that Elder Lorenzo Barnes had died in England we received this information by a letter from Elder P. P. Pratt. After reading the

letter he addressed the assembly in a vary feeling interesting & edefying manner among many other remarks he said he should have been more reconciled to the death of Elder Barnes could his bodey have been laid in the grave in Nauvoo or among the Saints, he said he had vary peculiar feelings relative to recieving an honorable burial with his father 12 he considered Nauvoo would be a burying place of the Saints & Should he die he considered it would be a great Blessing to be buried with the saints & especially to be buried with his father yes he wanted to lie by the side of his father that when the trump of God should sound & the voice of God should say ye Saints arise that when the tomb should birst he could arise from the grave & first salute his father & say O my father! & his father say O my son!! as they took each other by the hand he wished next to salute his brothers & sisters & then the Saints & he said it was upon this principle that the ancients were so particular to have an honorable burial with their fathers as in the case of Joseph, before his death he made his kindred promise to carry his bones to the land of Canann & they did so they embalmed his body took it to the land of Canaan & buried it with his fathers their is a glory in this that many do not comprehend, It is true that in the resurrection that the bodies will be caught up to meet the Lord & the Saints will all be brought together though they were scattered upon the face of the whole earth yet they would not as readily salute each other as though they lay down & rose up together from the same bed, To bring it to the understanding it would be upon the same principle as though two who were vary friends indeed should lie down upon the same bed at night locked in each other embrace talking of their love & should awake in the morning together they could immediately renew their conversation of love even while rising from their bed but if they were alone & in seperate apartments they could not as readily salute each other as though they were together He remarked that should he live & have an opportunity of gathering his friends who had died together he intended to do it but if he should not live to do it himself he hoped that some of his frie friends would. He wished all of the saints to be comforted with the victory they were to gain by the resurrection it is sufficient to encorage the saint to overcome in the midst of evry trial trouble & tribulation though thunders roar & earthquakes bellow, lightnings flash & wars are upon evry hand yet suffer not a joint to tremble nor let not your heart faint for the great Eloheem will deliver you & if not before the resurrection will set you eternally free from all these things from pain sorrow & death. I have labored hard & sought evry way to try to prepare this people to comprehend the things that God is unfolding to me In speaking of the resurrection I would say that God hath shown unto me a vission of the resurrection of the dead & I saw the graves open & the saints as they arose took each other by the hand even before they got up or while getting up & great Joy & glory rested upon them (transcribed as in the original diary).

William Clayton Diary

J preach[ed] on the ressurection shewing the importance of being buried with the saints & their relatives in as much as we shall want to see our relatives first & shall rejoice to strike hands with our parents, children &c when rising from the tomb.

— Andrew F. Ehat, 16 April 2023