I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Robert Carter III and The Body of Christ

One of the most exciting things about being part of life here at Bruton Parish is the chance to be in touch with the history that surrounds this place. Of course, as Christians, we don't just study the history of our towns, states, and countries — we also seek something deeper. I was speaking with one of our guides the other day while bringing some out-of-town friends to the parish for the first time. She wonderfully shared how, for her, being in this space and a part of this congregation gives the sense that she is surrounded by all the people who have worshipped here before. While she came about this view quite honestly, theologians call it the Communion of Saints.

Around the outside of this church building, and indeed, in the very floors on which we stand as we come up to receive communion and kneel at the altar rail, we are surrounded by those who have come before us. They mystically gather in praise of God with us as we celebrate the Eucharist with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.

Dr. Goodwin, the famed rector of this parish who dreamt up Colonial Williamsburg, is buried right there — next to the clergy, as if to keep an eye on things until the resurrection comes and he steps back into the box where he belongs. Goodwin liked to speak of the “gladsome ghosts” of Williamsburg. I think this was, at least in part, referring to his understanding of the Communion of Saints. He hoped that restoring the town would help people have eyes to see the ghosts that he saw.
For my part, I’ve never had trouble believing in the Communion of Saints, or even in seeing Goodwin’s ghosts as I walk about the historic area or come to pray in these steep-angled pews. It’s one thing to feel the presence of the saints, or even to see a ghost or two — but it’s another thing all together — as happened to me not long ago — to sit down in here to pray one quiet evening, and to open my eyes and see a ghost looking at me.

That’s certainly what I’ve experienced since a Church member, a Professor at the College of William and Mary, shared with me the story of Robert Carter III.

The questions that I’d like to answer this morning are first those that Andrew Levy asks in his scholarship on Carter: First of all, who was Robert Carter III, and secondly, why is it that so few of us have heard of him?¹ Finally, we’ll have to ask what this man, who would have worshipped here himself, has to say to us as the Body of Christ, here and now.

You may have heard of Robert “King” Carter, who is the grandfather of our man. They called him “King” because his power and wealth in the late sixteen and early seventeen hundreds was unparalleled, owning 300,000 acres of land in Virginia. The family connections to the English crown didn’t hurt either. Robert Carter III was born in 1728 and at age four he became a young heir to his father and grandfathers’ plantations and business holdings. He was sent to the College of William and Mary at age 9, where he studied until age 21, when he headed to London for a proper legal education.

In London, Carter III stood for the only portrait we have of him.² In his early twenties, he stands with his back comfortably arched, right hand on his hip, and a face that captures the entitlement of young American royalty. He holds a mask in his left hand, as if jumping into the photo booth before heading to the next party. By the time he returned to Virginia in 1751, it seems his peers were not impressed with him, with his own cousin, John Page, calling him an “inconceivable illiterate.”³

Yet his future success would be undeniable. He managed appointment on the governor’s council at age 28 and a marriage to a Francis Ann Tasker from a prominent Baltimore family. He would move his family to his grandfather’s home in Williamsburg, which still stands two blocks away from here, purposefully built right next to the Governor’s Palace. While in Williamsburg, it seems he began to read feverishly and developed friendships with the likes of Governor Fauquier, George Wythe, and a young Thomas Jefferson. His portion of the family business, through the 1770s and 80s continued to grow as he managed up to 15 plantations, over 70,000 acres, and nearly 500 slaves — more than any other Virginian.

This is the part that I don’t understand. By every measure, Robert Carter III should have been a Founding Father of this country whose name we know. He studied at William and Mary. He was a patriot, supporting laws and troops that

¹ Andrew Levy, “The Anti-Jefferson: Why Robert Carter III Freed his Slaves (And Why We Couldn’t Care less),” The American Scholar 70, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 15-35. I am entirely dependent upon Levy for the historical sketch of Robert Carter III in this sermon, unless otherwise cited. I am also dependent upon Levy for these questions which frame his research (see p. 16 of the above article).
² https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00002221mets.xml
³ http://www.history.org/almanack/people/bios/biorcarter.cfm, paragraph 2.
fought King George III. He had more money and land than George Washington. He was a peer and acquaintance of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Patrick Henry. But it seems, though he was one of the Jeffersons and Lees and Washingtons, he was never accepted by them.

The reason he was never accepted by the Virginia elite is unclear. Perhaps his wealth made them uncomfortable. Perhaps they could never get over the Old World entitlement of Carter’s youth. What’s more likely, though, is that Carter rejected them. In the year 1777, Carter, who was a member of the vestry of Cople Parish in Westmoreland County, began attending meetings at Morattico Baptist Church.5 There he left behind the hierarchy of Colonial Anglicanism in favor of evangelical Christianity. So radical was his conversion that he found himself worshipping next to the very people whom he owned, taking Communion alongside slaves — even as violent mobs tried to shut their gatherings down.

Carter began to treat his slaves differently around this time. He allowed them to bring grievances directly to him, thus taking power away from taskmasters. He was ambivalent about marrying his daughter into the Washington family. He never sent his children to William and Mary, opting for northern schools instead. And in 1791, he did the very thing that we should all know him for. He signed his name to a document that, like the signatures of his peers 15 years earlier, should have cemented his legacy as a Founding Father.

In 1791, Carter III signed a Deed of Gift which, carefully and legally, put into motion the manumission — the liberation — of all his slaves. Over the next 13 years, until his death in 1804, Carter freed and made provisions for over 400 of his slaves. His will continued to play out after his death — in spite of lawsuits from family members — and by the time his process was finished, Carter had freed upwards of 600 slaves — the largest single act of its kind in America before the Civil War.

If you’re still with me, we have now answered the first question as to who Robert Carter III was. The next question is about why so few of us know his name, and even why we’re comfortable that. The irony of it all is that what I’m suggesting — and what Andrew Levy suggests in his scholarship — is that we don’t know his name for the very reason that we should. Carter should be known as the founding father who freed his slaves — that should be the story told to elementary school students — but instead that’s exactly why he’s been forgotten! In his complete rejection of slavery, he condemns the very heroes that we hold dear who knew that slavery was wrong and were unwilling to act.

You won’t ever hear a debate over removing monuments to Robert Carter because the monuments simply don’t exist. We can celebrate Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington because their moral ambiguity regarding slavery makes us comfortable in living with our own hypocrisy, our own moral indifference, and our own divided loyalties.

As Americans, our failure to claim this story should make us deeply uncomfortable. As ones sharing in the Communion of Saints, as members of the Body of Christ as Paul puts it in our epistle today, Carter’s story should do something far more important.

5 Ibid.
Part of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is that somehow the faithful who have gone before us are still sharing in our lives, interceding on our behalf, even as they enjoy God’s glory more fully than we do. So what is Carter’s intercession for us? What is he telling us to help us live more faithfully?

First of all, he saying that sometimes being a member of the Body of Christ means rejecting the dominant narratives of our culture, even a great personal cost. Carter drank deeply from the spring of Enlightenment Rationalism and he found his thirst unquenched. It was only in the Good News of division breaking, power thwarting, evangelical Christianity that he found a truth which broke down the barriers that existed within him and around him.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about how as a member of the Body of Christ we have the right to relinquish our rights for the sake of our brothers and sisters. Carter had every right to own people by the standards of his time, but he chose to relinquish that right for the sake of the Body of Christ. So, he asks us, what power—what burden—are we willing to lay down for the sake of another?

Secondly, Robert Carter III found that his liberation, his very salvation, was wrapped up—not in the number of properties he owned, not in his business holdings, not even in his ability to achieve political power—his salvation was wrapped up in the salvation of the people around him. This is why we gather as Church! When he gathered with slaves in worship, and they broke bread together, he must have realized that they were members of one another—part of the one Body of Christ. Though we are many, we are members of each other also. Imagine that! Your salvation is wrapped up in the person sitting next to you—or even the person whom you have every right to ignore or exploit.

You know what all of this reminds me of? It reminds me of that old negro spiritual. We sing it sometimes. It’s simple, easy to remember. I wonder if Carter ever learned this one in those revival meetings that so changed his life and the lives of hundreds of others. It goes like this:

Let us break bread together on our knees,
Let us break bread together on our knees.
When we fall on our knees with our face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

What do you say we stand and sing this hymn before we say the Creed? It’s hymn 325. We’ll do all three verses!