

# Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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## Dust and Return

There are things Christians do in church on an annual basis that must seem downright odd to outsiders. We wash feet on Maundy Thursday as a sign of radical service. We gather around a fire on the feast of Epiphany and recall a certain star. We wear red on Pentecost because flames once rested upon timid disciples and got them going again. We decorate a tree in December not with sugarplum fairies but with old symbols. These are all celebrations in the church year with multiple layers of relative weirdness. We have lots of strange habits that take newcomers awhile to embrace. Conversion to Christianity is, in many ways, like learning a new language.

Ash Wednesday may win the grand prize for distinctive strangeness. A pastor comes at you with a glob of ash and pronounces these words: *"Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."*

One of the most impressive pastoral theologians of the mid-twentieth century, Carlyle Marney, after a lecture at Wake Forest Divinity School, was asked, "Do you believe in the Garden of Eden?" Without hesitation, Marney replied, "Yes, I do. It's at 250 Elm St. in Knoxville, Tennessee." Confused, the questioner said, "I thought it was somewhere in the Middle East." Dr. Marney repeated, "No. I have it on good authority that it's in Knoxville on Elm Street. That's where I stole some money from my mother's dresser, went down to the corner drug store and bought some candy, then came back and hid in my closet, eating it all. I thought I'd gotten away with something until I heard her walking through the house calling, 'Carlyle, where are you? What have you done?' She sounded like God."

As a result of disobedience, God says to Adam, "Eden's over. Remember you are dust. Now get out of here, but get on with your life." It seems a jarring punishment for eating the wrong piece of fruit. But if we look at it another way *Adam came from dust*. That's how God created him. (*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. Gen. 2:7*) The wordplay in Hebrew is revealing. The word for man is *adam*; thus his name. And the word for dust is *adamah*. There's a rich and suggestive association between these two words almost like saying *humans* come from *humus*.

So as the pastor on Ash Wednesday traced an ashen cross on your brow and said, "Remember that you are dust," it should have recalled the old Genesis story of disobedience and the modern story of disobedience with which we all struggle. But as we move forward into the season of Lent, remember that the dusty proclamation is also an ecological statement, a common kinship with this broken but gorgeous world. We are not *apart* (one word) from creation. We are *a part* (two words) of creation. To recall that we are dust is also a call to remember our ecological roots in the soil. "You messed up," God seems to say, "But I'm not kicking you out with no resources. Remember your kinship."

There's also a second half to the statement we heard on Ash Wednesday: *"And to dust you shall return."* We all have a term limit. We will all succumb to something. And even this is a blessing. Read sometime the short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." It's an odd story (also made into a movie) about a person who ages in reverse, and it is packed with lines about life's meaning. One quote: "I hope you make the best of it. And I hope you will see things that will startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet with people of a different viewpoint. I hope you live a life you're proud of. And if you find you're not, I hope you have the courage to start all over again...We're meant to lose the people we love. How else are we supposed to know how important they are?"

*And to dust you shall return.* Perhaps we should not look at this truth with somber sadness, but rather gospel opportunity. How shall we live this wild and wonderful life knowing our days are finite and numbered? In many ways **Lent is an invitation to wake up.**

--Adapted from an essay by Pr. Frank Honeycutt in his book  
*95 Prostheses (Appendages and Musings for the Body of Christ)*