

Tonight is a preview of what is to come. A looking ahead to the day when our loved ones will gather around us, and the pastor will say these words over us, over our bodies, "*Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*"

And that is exactly what will happen. "*You will return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return.*" *Genesis 3*

Sin's curse is over all of us whether we wear ashes on our foreheads or not. The very skin and bone of your forehead and mine is, in truth, the dust of the earth no matter if there is a black smudge there or not. Sin's curse means that we will die. In fact, we die every day. Have you noticed that your body is aging? Whether we are young or old, the aging process is a tell-tale sign that we will meet up with death sooner or later.

The day God spoke the words of the curse in Eden may not have been a Wednesday. But in a very real sense, it was the first Ash Wednesday. On that day the world was plunged into darkness, such as the darkness that adorns the altar tonight. Ash Wednesday is when we stand with our first parents, wearing the sackcloth of a repentant heart, and owning the words of the Lord God, "Yes, truly, I am dust and ashes, and to the dust I shall return."

And if you are dust, and if I am dust, then how can we think so highly of ourselves? How is it possible for us to be puffed up with sinful pride if we will, one day, return to the ground from whence we came? And indeed, is this not why it is so vital for Christians to gather in the house of the Lord on this very night? What a necessary reminder for us, just as every Christian burial is such a reminder.

And, my friends, at every Christian burial the darkness becomes light. For after the words, "*Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,*" these words immediately follow, "*In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

He is the Light that overcomes the darkness. God did not leave you to rot under sin's curse. He stepped into our world of dust and ashes and became one of us. He covered Himself with our dust. The Son of God put on human flesh and became man.

And all this to be tossed onto the ash heap of Golgotha for us. Jesus wore your dust in order to wear your sin. And He wore it well. So well, that He became sin for us. He felt sin's curse, the curse of the cross, so that you have no fear of that curse. And so, your black smudge is in the shape of the cross. Yes, you are dust and to dust you shall return. But there is for you the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through your Lord Jesus Christ because He wore the cross for you.

In your baptism His cross was traced upon your forehead and heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. The black smudge will go away. But your baptism endures forever. The cross of Jesus is always imprinted there upon your forehead. Trace it often, my friend, as a beautiful reminder that you are always one redeemed by Jesus. You are always one for whom He

died. Your sin is forgiven. Not some of your sin; all of it. Not for some of you; all of you are forgiven.

Tonight the journey begins. It begins with the darkness of this day. But it will end with the dawn's early light of Easter. And since tonight is a preview of what is to come, pay close attention to our last hymn: This Body in the Grave We Lay. We sing this hymn tonight ahead of time, your burial hymn and mine. For the body in the grave of which we sing tonight is your body and my body. That day is coming, and tonight we own that day.

But even more, Jesus owns you, for He bought you with His precious blood and made you His own in Holy Baptism. And so, we accept the truth that we are dust and to dust we shall return, because our sure and certain hope is in Jesus Christ. Amen.