

Stephen R. Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
Wednesday, February 17, 2021
Ash Wednesday, Revised Common Lectionary
[Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)
[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)
[Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)

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About a month ago, a small group of us gathered here, just outside the western door of the church, to lay Alice LaFollette's ashes to rest in the Garden of the Resurrection. They had been waiting for ten months, resting in a place of honor right here inside the altar, side by side with the ashes of another beloved parishioner who died last spring, Rebecca Gbasha; resting together like companionable roommates through a time of pandemic until a seasonable time.

Rebecca's ashes are still here, and we will inter them when the time is right. But last month Alice's family and close friends decided the time was right, and so six or seven of us gathered there in the garden, chairs spaced apart, masks on, camera and laptop present so that Alice's sister and her husband could join us on Zoom from Ohio: a typical COVID-time burial service, to the extent that anything is typical. But even with so much different, so much was also the same as ever. We prayed the prayers of the church, with their sturdy, timeless words: *In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our sister Alice, and we commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* And we poured her ashes into their home right there in God's honest soil. I took a trowelful of earth and sprinkled it down into the hole, and most of the rest of us came around and did the same. And just like every time we do this, I was struck by the sheer elemental honesty of this thing we do: dirt sprinkled onto ash, the basic molecules of our earthly existence mingling back together with the organic matter they came from. In the book of

Genesis God scoops up some of the dirt from the ground and breathes into it and it becomes the *Adam*, the human being, or maybe we should say the dirt creature, because *Adamah* in Hebrew is the word for the ground, just as in English we have the word *human* which is related to the word *humus*.

Remember that you are dust, says today's liturgy, and to dust you shall return. Today we mark ourselves with ash, a sign of endings and new beginnings, a sign of the destruction that precedes new birth.

Those of us worshiping in person outside this afternoon were sprinkled with ashes on the top of the head, a way of reducing our physical contact in this time of COVID, but also a return to an older way of imposing ashes on Ash Wednesday. Still in some parts of the world that's what people are accustomed to doing, rather than the newer tradition of drawing a cross on the forehead with the ashes. And with this sprinkling I'm reminded of that image of those particles of earth gently falling onto the ashes being interred: welcoming this baptized child of God back into the warm embrace of the earth that is our mother.

Of course drawing the cross on the forehead is a good tradition too, because it connects what we're doing to the cross of Christ, the ultimate place where death and new birth find their center. And it connects us to our baptism, when just as we emerge from the waters, we are marked on the forehead with the sign of the cross of Christ. So drawing this cross of ashes is a way of retracing that sign that we belong to Jesus, that his way of self-giving love leading through death to new life is our way. Some of those of us worshiping online tonight might choose to draw that cross shape. Others might choose to sprinkle ashes on their heads. Either is good.

We have seen plenty of ashes this year. Too many, really. In the fall we were blanketed with ashes, real, literal ones, flying on the wind, just as we have been for each of the last several years. Ashes of trees, but also of beloved homes and possessions. In a broader sense we have seen the ashes of so, so many who have died from this global pandemic—not all of them literally cremated, of course, but

in many places crematoria were indeed overwhelmed, as were graveyards; around the world, two and a half million have died at least. And in a more metaphorical sense, perhaps, many of us have seen the ashes of the destruction of some of our illusions about the society we live in and its commitment to the dignity and flourishing of all.

Ashes mean that something has died; something has been destroyed. Here in Lent the church calendar asks us to acknowledge that death and destruction and endings are our reality. This year, of all years, it is good to make that recognition, and maybe easier than in years when prosperity or comfort tempt us to turn away from it. Now of course ashes can also be the beginning of something new. Here in Sonoma County of all places we know just how green can be the new growth in a fire zone. Indeed we as Christians are an Easter people. All our hope is in the new life God is able to bring out of death, the new life flowing through us from the risen Jesus Christ. But it is good that we have a calendar that encourages us not to rush there too quickly, not to turn our backs on the reality of pain and destruction. For today, for tonight, we can just sit gently among the ashes, trusting that God is here too.