

The shape of ashes

To say "earth to earth" is a good thing, we have to believe it's really going to happen.

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [February 18, 2015](#) issue



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Among Christians, marking with ashes first occurred in the early Middle Ages as a sign of sorrow and repentance. Perhaps if we had lived then, with the Visigoths and the bubonic plague bearing down on us, when the slogan of the day was *memento mori* ("remember, you will die") and a woman's average life expectancy was 32 years, we too would have thought it was a splendid idea to show up at church once a year in sackcloth and ashes.

The symbol of ashes emerges from the depths of the earth, as old as fire, as bitter as shame, and as fundamental as death. When Abraham decides to bargain with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he says to God, "Who am I to bargain with you? I am nothing but dust and ashes." After King David's daughter, Tamar, is raped by her own brother, the scripture says she covered her head with ashes.

If you have ever carried the ashes of a fellow human being in one of those bronze boxes provided by the mortuary, you must admit that your first thought is not of repentance or shame or even God, but only mortality. You ask yourself, how has this beloved human, with whom I once shared laughter and tears, become nothing more than humus, the stuff of the earth?

Of course, if you love the earth, you tell yourself that this is all natural and good. In her novel *A Thousand Acres* Jane Smiley writes of the goodness of her farmland: “For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. . . . It all drifted down, lazily, in the warm, soupy water—leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen—then mixed with the saturated soil below and became, itself, soil. They were the soil, and the soil was the treasure.”

But before we can say “earth to earth, ashes to ashes” is good or God’s way, we have to believe it’s going to happen not to the other guy but to me. And this can be a hard sell. Most of my students belong to the demographic known as “the Invincibles,” the twentysomethings who are declining health insurance on a massive scale because they are never going to get sick and, consequently, are never going to die.

The point of Ash Wednesday is not to rub everyone’s nose in their own mortality. That would make us angels of death and not messengers of life. But we do have to make our way from the weight of ashes—in that little box—to what St. Paul calls the weight of glory, which is in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And there *is* a way.

The first station on the way from death to life is the “little death” of repentance. To repent is to admit, “I am nothing but dust and ashes,” but then to confess that the ashes represent more than my finite nature or my bad back or fretful dreams. Our ashes are the ways in which we have turned away from the will and love of God, followed our own will and pursued other loves. Luther said the human being is *incurvatus in se*, curved in upon itself. Our love is like a boomerang that, no matter how piously we aim it at others, always comes wheeling back to our own desires.

Sometimes we mistake regret for repentance. It’s been said that regret is an old man’s disease, but what a shame to waste it on the elderly. Anyone can wallow in regret, but not everyone knows how to repent. Repentance entails a turning away

from yourself (including your regrets) toward someone who has the authority to give the definitive answer to your entire life. With regret, you're beating up on yourself and loving it. Repentance acknowledges the possibility of an answer that makes things right.

Repentance carries us toward the goal of reconciliation. A heart turned toward God is ready to turn toward others. Then it's possible to forgive another human being—someone who has failed you, hated you, or betrayed you. It is possible, at least, to make something "right" with them. You may not continue in close communion, but something has been made right. The tremendous burden of hate or resentment has been lifted from *your* shoulders.

The hardest thing to make right is an act of lovelessness for which there is no remedy. It is over. There's no one with whom to reconcile. Your arms are open, but no one's arms are open to you. We may repent, and we may forgive, but because of death, distance, or circumstance, there's no one there to forgive us back. We feel empty. We have fallen short of the definitive answer. Just then, Jesus stands in for the missing one or the action whose consequences cannot be called back. Jesus says, "You can't reconcile with that person or community because they are dead to you, but I am alive. I stand in for them. Reconcile with me."

When I was an intern during my seminary days, I served in a large church where the minister did about 40 funerals a year. One day he called me into his office and told me to take a funeral for him that afternoon. This made me uneasy. Apparently, I had skipped the class in which we learned how to bury people. I told him I didn't know how.

He walked me over to the parish hall, where he took a piece of chalk and, like a coach drawing up a three-point play, drew the outline of an imaginary grave on the linoleum floor. He told me where to stand, how to act, and what to say. Then he took a mysterious vial from his inside pocket and said, "These are the ashes. When you come to the committal, pour these at the head of the casket and say, 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' And one more thing: don't be sloppy. Make sure you make the sign of the cross with the ashes."

I might have asked, "Why not be sloppy with the ashes? That's what death is all about, isn't it? A chaotic reunion with the soil, which itself is a chaos of comingled organisms on a planet named Earth."

But in Christ, even the chaos of ashes finds a form. We don't receive the ashes on Ash Wednesday only; we bring them to the altar every day. The little box we carry is our own. Only in Jesus are they gathered into the shape of the cross. Time and again, we bring them to him and then return to our mortal lives with something far better.

I can still hear my old mentor, as he pulled the vial out of his coat. "Here are the ashes. Remember, the shape—the *shape*—is essential. Don't be sloppy."