

WHY JESUS? - UP FROM THE ASHES

It's a humbling and horrifying sight the first time you experience it. For me it came in the form of my pet bunny, Sniffy. One moment, there she was hopping around the house like nobody's business, chewing on the furniture, ripping threads from the carpet. What a great pet for a 10 year old boy. I wonder why my parents didn't appreciate her, so much. But then the day came when her legs wouldn't hop any more. And quietly, while cradled in my arms one February evening in 1972, she closed her eyes and never opened them again. This was, for me, the first of many faces of death that I would see in my journey of faith. And I have to say, despite the much greater gravity of other experiences with it, it might have been the worst for me. After all, it was the first, and I was young. And I just couldn't get her out of my head. The next year it was my grandmother. Then another pet. And, as the years progressed, included my baby niece, my father, my mother, aunts and uncles, another niece, and scores of parishioners.

And each one carried with it a boatload of memories -- the vibrancy of their faces as they lived out their days. And each one also included a memory of the closed eyes, the silence and horror of realizing that they are no longer a part of my daily journey -- no longer a companion on this earth.

If I was not a person of faith it would be most unsettling. After all, without the hope of eternal life and the promise of God's resurrection, that is the destiny of us all. Dust. From dust were we made and to dust shall we return.

You know what I'm talking about. You, most likely, have experienced it too. In fact, even now as I'm speaking to you, there is probably another portrait floating through your mind of someone you loved whose body is now tucked away in a crypt, a grave, an urn, or somewhere scattered among the earth.

Why Jesus? Why? Why is He worthy of our praise, worthy of our hearts, worthy of our love, our devotion, our time and talent? How is He different than all others? That's the question we'll be answering over these next six weeks. But tonight we begin to answer the question with these: the black ashes that have been placed upon our foreheads in the sign of the cross. These are symbols that strike to the very core by highlighting our mortality, our sin, the destiny of our bodies, the finality of our earthly walk.

Thousands of years ago, God brought the dust together when He formed from the ground these earthly vessels we call bodies. And His breath of life brought hope and joy and what seemed to be a glorious future for the crown of His creation.

But it wasn't long before Adam and Eve found the reality of God's warning to be true: that in the day they turn from Him to seek their own glorification by eating of the forbidden fruit, "they would surely die." You can almost see the horror on their faces as they experienced, for the first time, the last breath of one they loved -- the last glance of one who was once standing strong and tall. "NOOOO! They likely shouted, as the cold horror of their choice now came to bear and cut down one who was meant to live forever.

And yet, while they shrieked and wept, a word rang in their ears, a promise from God made to them when they had first turned away from Him. "One of your descendants -- one born of a Virgin, will eventually crush the head of the serpent and lead you back to me. He Himself will know the sting of death and the curse of punishment, but He will emerge victorious over every enemy and bring life to you."

When Jesus came, it was that Genesis promise which again sang to those who understood -- even from His earliest days. To the Virgin Mary, who would bear Him, to the faithful Joseph, who would raise Him -- shepherds, magi, a prophet and prophetess in the Temple and a cousin who was called to be a preparing one. They would look at Jesus and see God bringing His incredible plan to fruition.

Others would begin to see it too. Peter would declare, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Martha would say, "Lord, if you had been here, brother would not have died. You are the Christ, the Son of God." And during His ministry, Jesus would make plain that God's death curse could be reversed -- that He had come, in fact, for that very purpose.

You see it tonight in the lessons we read. A little girl -- the daughter of a synagogue leader, is near death. Her father leaves his daughter's side to come and implore Jesus to heal her. While there, the message rings out: "Jairus, your daughter is dead." Dust is the end. Life is gone.

But Jesus declares: “Do not be afraid Jairus, only believe.” And when He gets to the house He tells Jairus that his daughter is only sleeping. The scoffers laugh. There is no such mistake. But then, with two simple words Jesus bids her to stand. And the next thing you know, Jairus’ daughter is having a bite to eat. Score: Jesus 1. Dust 0.

Then, in Luke chapter 7 we see Jesus in a little town called Nain. He watches as a mother’s only son is being carried out for burial. Jesus, it says, “had compassion on her” and said to her, “do not weep.” Then Jesus reached out His hand and touched the place where the son was laid, and right away he sat up and began speaking as if nothing had happened. Jesus 2. Dust 0.

Then finally, it is near Holy Week, just before Jesus will head down toward Jerusalem where He will be betrayed and captured. Jesus comes to Bethany to see His good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Lazarus has been reported very sick, and before He reaches the house, Jesus learns from Martha that Lazarus has died. In fact, he has now been dead for four days.

Jesus weeps with Martha and Mary, but then goes out to the tomb and calls forth His friend as if Lazarus is only in the next room. And doesn’t Lazarus come walking out, grave cloths in hand, and show himself quite definitely risen from the dead? Jesus 3. Dust 0.

“But wait,” you say, “isn’t it actually Dust Billions and Jesus 0? Does not death eventually become the master of us all -- the ultimate Victor even over Jairus’ daughter, the widow of Nain’s son, and Lazarus? After all, they’re not still walking the earth? Death was halted, but eventually the power of the dust eventually came knocking?”

And I say to you, “no.” “No” because He who is Lord of the Tree of Life showed us that His Son is indeed the One Who can remove the curse from these earthly vessels and turn their dust into life again. The Serpent’s word will never be the final word for all those who bring their dust to Jesus, because He is the One who will take that dust and bring it back to life.

Tonight you have the mark of death on your foreheads. The dust says, “Nothing can stop me. I am inevitable. Sin leads to death. You are a sinner. So give in to a culture that says, ‘there is nothing more’ and let yourself lose hope and heart. Be filled with despair at the utter

meaninglessness of it all. Or eat, drink and be merry and live for yourself. It matters not to me. I am just the tool of him who slithers in the dust and desires your ultimate destruction.

But the cross on your forehead says something different. It says that you cling to a promise made all the way back at the beginning; and that Him who died on that cross is the fulfillment of that promise. And so, you yield neither to despair nor carousing, but instead lay down your life at the foot of the cross and declare: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ. You died on the cross to pay the price for my salvation and you rose from the dead to secure my future.”

And as you trust in Him, one more time the tally grows. Dust again gets a zero. Christ, again wins the war. And the day will soon come when He who died, will return in glory and take that dust and create again. And we will live forever according to both body and soul.

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering over the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life overtake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me;
Lo, it glows with peace and joy.