

PEPPERDINE

Human Resources



On Ash Wednesday, this Easter message was already on my mind. Recall with me that Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine's Day, and as we made our way through that day of love, we received news about a school shooting in Florida. As I watched coverage, one picture stood out: a mother, waiting for her child to exit the school building with fear on her face - and ashes in the form of a cross on her forehead.

I didn't grow up in a tradition that observes Ash Wednesday or Lent, but I have come to appreciate these practices. In ancient Christianity, followers of Jesus began to symbolize their need for repentance by having ashes imposed on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. And the one imposing the ashes quotes from Genesis 3, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is a day to intentionally think about death by symbolically having death imposed on us.

On my Facebook feed that same Wednesday, I noticed several of my friends with pictures in which they wore ashes - a friend who was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, another friend

who is fighting cancer, a former student who just landed his dream job. And one photo stood out - a new baby girl born to one of our faculty families, Joshua and Hannah Bowman. They named their daughter Zoe, meaning life. On her first Ash Wednesday, Zoe and her parents received ashes together. Someone spoke words of death over a healthy baby girl whose name is life. That symbolism took my breath away. In all their circumstances, young and old, healthy and sick, my friends wore ashes to embody a reality we often neglect: we are dust.

That may sound morbid or sad, but it is a misrepresentation of Lent's meaning to present it as bad news. Despite the reality of death, God's story is ultimately Good News, even on terrible days when it's hard to believe. Christians believe that while death is a serious and tragic part of life, it is not the entire story. The message that inaugurates Lent, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" is found in Genesis just after the creation story in which we are told about how God lovingly formed a person from the dust of the ground and breathed into human nostrils the breath of life. Christians believe the story of life in Genesis is bookended by Jesus in another story of life in Revelation 22 when they "will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads," shining life that overcomes death. The story in context from beginning to end is that humans were created for life, not death, and will ultimately experience life, not death.

So even on days or years where dust and ashes overwhelm us, we recall the entire story as we make our way through Lent to Easter Sunday, a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus and an anticipation of the ultimate resurrection to come. Remember that baby girl Zoe I mentioned earlier? When I wrote her parents to receive their permission to mention them here, they told me her middle name is Anastasia, which means resurrection. And so, we say together at Easter: Life. Resurrection.

John 11:25 "I am the resurrection and the life."

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