

"I AM the Resurrection and the Life"

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Easter Sunday

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¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:17-27)

As we stand in the glorious light of Easter Sunday, I cannot help but think back to the beginning of Lent. Following a tradition that is at least a thousand years old,¹ we, like millions of Christians around the world, marked the start of our preparation for Easter by receiving a mark of ashes on our foreheads. The ashes, which symbolize our failings, our weaknesses, and our mortality, embody our desire to repent of our sin, and our hope that, at the end of Lent, we will be able to present ourselves to God a little cleaner, a little purer.

I want to take a moment here to pull back the curtain a bit on the life we pastors lead behind the scenes and confess that getting those ashes ready for Ash Wednesday can be a tricky thing, because the substance we use to impose the mark of the cross is actually a mixture of ash and oil. Plain ashes don't stick; they just fall all over your face and clothes. So, before the Ash Wednesday service, back there in that little room, we add some olive oil to our ashes. But here is the rub: if we add too little, the ashes will still be too dusty and fall away; if we add too much, we have a runny, oily mess on our hands. It can be a real struggle to get the balance right.

If you think about it, though, that describes who we are pretty well. Right from the very beginning, our lives have been a mixture of ashes and oil. In the second chapter of Genesis, when God creates the earth, scripture tells us that "*the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*"² The Hebrew word "*aphar*" in that passage can be translated as "dust," but it can also mean "ashes." Ashes to ashes; dust to dust. Very humble beginnings.

At the same time, scripture tells us we were made "in the image of God."³ We may be assembled with organic matter, but we have also been imbued with the cleansing, fragrant,

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-when-did-ash-wed-begin-and-why-do-we-celebrate-it>

² Genesis 2:7.

³ Genesis 1:26-27.



life-giving breath of God – the sacred oil of God’s likeness. Ashes and oil... you and I are creatures of two natures:

- Ashes are gritty and dirty; oil is pure and clean.
- Ashes are commonplace; oil is precious and rare.
- Ashes are remnants of burning or decomposition; oil restores and heals.
- Ashes represent death and mortality; oil represents life and immortality.
- Ashes symbolize mourning; oil symbolizes joy and gladness.
- Ashes are a mark of poverty; oil denotes abundance.
- Ashes represent humanity; oil signifies divinity.

Which brings us to Bethany, and the family of Lazarus. Grieving the death of their brother, Mary and Martha are mourning the loss in sackcloth and ashes. They are also angry with their friend Jesus, who knew that Lazarus was ill but still delayed his arrival for reasons they did not understand. When Jesus finally arrives, Mary cannot even bring herself to rise and greet him. At different times, both sisters express the same painful, bitter sentiment: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Despite this ashy, emotional start to his visit, Jesus transforms it all with a healing balm. Telling the women that their brother would rise again, he once again claims a power and a sacred name that only God can claim. *“I am the resurrection and the life,”* he says. *“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”* A short time later, while the family is still confused about what Jesus means, Jesus instructs the family to roll away the stone sealing the tomb. In a loud voice, he cries, “Lazarus, come out!” When the dead man came out, his body still wrapped in burial cloth, Jesus tells them to “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Instantly, the ashes of their discontent are blown away. Sorrow and anger are overwhelmed with joy. The stench of death and decay is overcome with the fragrance of new life. And a family that had been mired in grief was now singing the song of the ancient psalmist: *“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”*⁴

This past Ash Wednesday, before I mixed the ashes and oil for the evening service, I drove over to the hospital in Bronxville for a visit. It was a grey day, chilly, with a misting drizzle. The drive over included an above average number of cranky drivers, and parking was kind of a headache. By the time I entered the crowded lobby, I was in a very sackcloth and ashes kind of mood.

That’s when I heard someone call my name. That was odd, because I don’t think I know anyone from Bronxville. But I turned around to see Pat McEvily (Mc-EV-il-ee), a regular attendee at LAC’s Thursday morning men’s studies. He explained that he volunteered regularly at that hospital, and that day he was helping the chaplain administer ashes.

At that point, I suddenly began to realize how many people around me had ashen crosses on their foreheads. I hadn’t noticed before. Seems my ashy mood had blinded me to others who were literally wearing ashes. We spoke a moment, but then the elevator opened and I headed upstairs to check on the patient I had come to see.

As I was coming back down, I decided that, if Pat and his chaplain friend were still in the lobby, I was going to ask them for some ashes. Sure enough, when the elevator doors

⁴ Psalm 30:8-12.

opened, they were right there, seated at their table. I think Pat was a little surprised when I asked him to impose the mark on my forehead. He probably figured that I, as a pastor, would have other, more formal places where I could get them. Maybe so, but in that moment I could not imagine a better place than this one. So, with a brief but meaningful blessing, Pat marked the sign of the cross on my forehead with that sacred mixture – a little bit of ash, a little bit of oil. And it was just the anointing that I needed.

I say anointing because, in scripture, anointing with oil has always been a way to transform something ordinary into something sacred. For example, when the tabernacle in the wilderness was completed, it was anointed with oil to mark it as a place where God's holy presence could abide. When Aaron and others became priests, they too were anointed with oil to set them apart for sacred duties. When kings of Israel took the throne in Israel, even they were anointed as a way to bless their authority. In all of these ways, some ordinary place, some ordinary thing, or some ordinary person was symbolically marked or set apart as something a little more sacred... a little more holy.

And that, I believe, is what it really means for Christ to be the Resurrection and the Life. In Old Testament Hebrew, the word "Messiah" literally means "anointed one." The same is true of the word "Christ" in New Testament Greek. On Easter morning, the anointing of Jesus became complete, and when the tomb broke open, the power of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the world.⁵ And in that moment, all the ordinary people who trust in Christ were anointed right along with him. In that moment, we inherited his Resurrection, for *"those who believe in [him], even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in [him] will never die."* In that moment, we also inherited his Life. *"Because I live,"* Jesus says, *"you also will live."*⁶ Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been anointed to be bearers and sharers of all the things that the oil represents: health, purity, righteousness, joy, and abundance.

Now, I suspect some of you are thinking right now, "I don't feel like an anointed one, and I certainly don't feel very holy." Don't worry about that. In fact, I would say that every faithful person who has ever lived has felt like that. The truth is that life really is a mixed bag of good and bad, sorrow and joy, darkness and light. And we do not have any trouble seeing the ashes. We know well the impurities in our own hearts. We know about the brokenness of the world. Day by day, even hour by hour, we see the grief, the spiritual and physical pollution, the dark results of war, hatred, prejudice, and greed. We see these ashes. We live with these ashes.

The oil is much more of a mystery. Back in the 4th century, Saint Augustine preached a memorable sermon about oil. It was clear from the parable that oil was a good thing. The servants who had more oil were blessed, lucky, and ready for anything. Those who had little ran out and were left out in the cold. It was clear the oil represented something, but no one could be sure what it was. Closing his sermon, Augustine offered an explanation.

So what is it? he asked. "What is this oil? Whatever it is, it must signify something great something exceedingly great!" For Augustine, there could be only one answer. "Do you think," he said, "that it is not love?" What else could it be but love? Knowing Christ... and

⁵ Joel 2:28.

⁶ John 14:9.

knowing what Christ endured for us and sacrificed for us... how could the oil be anything except love?⁷

That is what Easter adds to the mix. Into the dry ashes that litter the world, into the course ashes that choke our spirits, Easter adds the oil of love.

- Love is what brought Jesus to tears when he saw Mary and Martha broken by grief.
- Love is what endured the betrayal of Judas.
- Love is what looks past the denials of Peter.
- Love is what accepted the cruel nails of the cross.
- Love is what blew open the door to the tomb and broke the chains of death.
- Love is the oil that we carry into the world... that turns mourning into dancing... that will wipe every tear from our eyes, until death is no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.
- Love is what is making all things new.

What else could it be but love?

Amen.

⁷ Saint Augustine, "The Ten Virgins," *Great Sermons of the World*, Clarence E. MacArtney, ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson (1997), pp. 47-8.