

Dust to dust: The holiness of ashes

I am more at home with the ashes of Lent than with the perfect lilies of Easter.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

Easter is almost here and I know I should be glad. The whole Christian year leans toward this Sunday of all Sundays, when God raised Jesus from the dead and made the whole creation new. During the great 50 days that follow, the trajectory of the Easter hymns will be *up*. As one verse by Charles Wesley has it, “Soar we now where Christ has led, following our exalted Head; made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies.”

Maybe I am simply too comfortable on the ground to sing such words with the gusto they deserve, but the truth is that the trajectory of my faith points *down*. The skies do not interest me nearly as much as the earth does, and soaring strikes me as a less worthwhile activity than, say, sharing the simplest meal among friends. Maybe my appetite for eternity is less than it should be, but I am more at home with the ashes of Lent than with the perfect lilies of Easter—and never more so than after the year just past.

Along with many other sacramentally minded Christians, I began the season of Lent almost 40 days ago with ashes on my head. I did not put them there myself. I got them at church, where I knelt at the altar rail with others who pressed their shoulders against mine in hopes that together we might withstand the truth we were about to hear. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” the priest said to each one of us as he rubbed ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross.

Like God, he showed no partiality. He said the sentence the same way to sick people as he did to those who were flush with health. He did not soften his voice for the children, either, although that must have been hard for him. Leaning over a baby whose breath was still redolent with mother’s milk, he marred her perfect complexion. “Remember that you are dust,” he said to her as she reached for his

sooty thumb, “and to dust you shall return.”

Until this past year, I always heard that sentence as a negative comment on flesh, or at least a cautionary one. As grateful as you may be for that body, I heard Ash Wednesday say, as good as God may have made you, don't get too attached to your incarnation for it is made of perishable stuff. Then September 11 happened, and no one had to go to church for ashes. Television screens were full of ashes. The air in Manhattan was full of ashes. Hearts around the world were full of ashes.

Like many others I read the obituaries in the *New York Times*—page after page of them—and mourned people I never knew. As long as they remained abstract numbers I did not have to care about them, but once I saw their pictures my comfort zone was gone. Some lives rated three paragraphs, others only one, but in every one I found some detail, some point of human contact, that made me realize I had lost kin. He loved hockey. She had just become engaged to her childhood sweetheart. The brothers both worked in tower number two.

Many weeks after the attacks, I listened to a Port Authority policeman interviewed on the radio. As he spoke, I could hear the groaning of dump trucks in the background, the hissing and popping of cutting torches turned on steel. Thirty of his friends had died on September 11, the policeman explained, which was why he could not stay away from the site. When the reporter asked him to describe the scene for those who were listening, he talked about the relief workers who were sifting through the powdered debris on the ground, carrying two handfuls at a time over to a tarp where they searched through it for anything recognizably human. What struck him most, the policeman said, was their utter reverence for what they carried in their hands. “It's nothing but ashes,” he said, “and yet you should see how they touch it.”

Listening to him turned Ash Wednesday inside out for me, so that when I went to kneel at the rail this year I received a different sacrament. The gospel of the day is not about the poverty of flesh so much as it is about the holiness of ashes, which are worthy of all reverence. It was God who decided to breathe on them, after all, God who chose to bring them to life. We are certainly dust and to dust we shall return, but in the meantime our bodies are sources of deep revelation for us. They are how we come to know both great pain and great pleasure. They help us to recognize ourselves in one another. They are how God gets to us, at the most intimate and universal level of all.

Bodies frighten us too, of course—not only when they are sick or dirty but also when they are passionate or demanding—which may be why we are so often tempted to think of ourselves as essential spirits instead. But believers in the word made flesh are called to resist that temptation, even as we have ashes pressed into our foreheads. Those ashes are not curses. They are blessings instead, announcing God’s undying love of dust no matter what kind of shape it is in.

Whatever else Easter is about, it is about remembering this: *All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*