

5-1-1993

## Remember that You are Dust

Mark W. Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark W. (1993) "Remember that You are Dust," *Consensus*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol19/iss1/10>

This Sermons is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# Remember that You are Dust...

**Mark Harris**

*Pastor, Mt. Zion Lutheran Church  
Waterloo, Ontario*

## **Text: Ash Wednesday: C**

It has been a very typical day in many ways,  
much like the great majority of days in  
my life.

Up at 6 a.m. to let out the dog and make  
the coffee.

A quiet conversation with my wife  
before I head upstairs  
to rouse the kids and get a shower.

Then off to work,  
dropping the kids at school and day care  
on the way.

Office work and phone calls this morning,  
a quick hospital visit just after  
lunch  
and then class this afternoon.

Home again around 4:30, to help make supper.  
My son and I play 20 questions while we  
clean up the dishes,  
and after he runs off, 2/3's of the way  
through the job,  
my wife tells me about her day before I  
then head out for this evening's  
worship.

It is a pretty typical day in many ways,  
filled with its joys,  
its rewards and frustrations.

Perhaps not a great deal different than your  
own.

But it is my life...

and like an old glove it fits me,  
and I am comfortable with it and  
cherish it,

and generally speaking,  
would not have it any other way.

Perhaps that is why the haunting words of  
Ash Wednesday are always such a shock  
to me...

why Ash Wednesday always comes as such an  
interruption...

to many of us.

For into the richness and pleasure,  
into the anguish and struggles of our  
living

are spoken those few words which bring us  
up short.

For the unalterable announcement of

Ash Wednesday

constrain us to stop what we are doing  
and where we are going,

and to look at ourselves,  
our community,

and our world

through different eyes.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you  
shall return.”

With a smudge of ashes,

and without even a name to identify this  
dust whereby we are known,  
we are signed and sealed...

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you  
shall return.”

They are strange words, coming from God's  
mouth.

But they were God's words,  
spoken to Adam after his disobedience  
in the Garden of Eden.

But probably what makes them so shocking,  
is our recognition that they are  
spoken to us as well.

We too, have walked the path of that first  
Adam,  
a path of disobedience leading us  
back to the dust,  
to destruction and death.

And we do not have to look very far  
or even very acutely,  
to know that this is true;  
to see that even our greatest and most  
noble human efforts,  
started with the most admirable of  
intentions,  
are somehow twisted,  
never quite bearing the fruits for  
which we hoped.

The unleashing of the atom which offered the  
gift of seemingly unlimited energy  
supplies,  
has also brought the ashes of Nagasaki  
and Hiroshima,  
the growing dilemma of radioactive  
waste,  
and the continuing threat of nuclear  
holocaust.

The collapse of the Iron Curtain and the fall  
of communism,  
rather than bringing the anticipated  
freedom and prosperity to  
Eastern Europe,  
has brought floundering economies,  
food shortages,  
and the violence and civil  
strife associated with growing  
nationalism.

The continuing advances in medical science,  
while offering the hope of diagnosis and  
cure

to once hopeless diseases,  
 have also presented us with skyrocketing  
 health care costs,  
 and moral dilemmas which we are ill  
 equipped to resolve.  
 Even in our personal lives... we know this  
 to be true.  
 How often is it the very people whom  
 we most love and treasure,  
 who bear the brunt of our anger, our  
 hurt and our frustrations?  
 In all of this, and in the countless other  
 symptoms,  
 woven into the very fabric of life,  
 we feel the aching constraints,  
 the fundamental flaw  
 of our sinful humanity.  
 And we know that, try as we might...  
 there is nothing...  
 nothing...  
 that we can do to change that  
 fact.

In that awareness  
 we know that we, too, will die;  
 and that our lives,  
 and all that we cherish,  
 will come to an end;  
 that all of this richness and wonder  
 and pleasure,  
 no less than this pain and suffering  
 and outrage  
 which we call our lives  
 and our world,  
 will be dust.  
 Dust... that is the word that the Bible uses  
 to refer to the things of this world.  
 Dust, not earth or rock,  
 the solid stuff from which the  
 skyscrapers of cities are built  
 and from which the great mountain ranges

are formed...  
 but dust,  
   the dry,  
     weightless,  
       bothersome stuff  
 which we scatter with the sweep of a dust  
   cloth...  
     the annoying speck to get in your  
       eye,  
     or irritate your throat.

It is a raw and discomforting fact,  
 one which on a day to day basis  
   we push from our minds.

And yet, the very purpose of Lent is to  
 recall us from the diversions of our  
 daily routines...

    not to be morbid,  
 but to consider our lives in this light.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you  
 shall return.”

This insistent reminder of the ultimate  
 insignificance of the things of this  
 world might  
 mean that we should live as wildly as we dare,  
 for it will soon all be gone.

Or it might simply terrify and frighten the  
 living day lights out of us—  
 except for one thing:

When those words are said,  
 “Remember that you are dust, and to dust  
 you shall return”,  
 in those churches where it is the custom  
   for the pastor to mark the foreheads  
     of penitents with ashes,  
 as a token of what they will soon be,  
   the mark is made in the form of a  
     cross.

It is that cross, signed with ashes,  
 which points us to the meaning and the  
 hope,

not just for this lenten season,  
but for the whole of life.

It was, with that same cross upon our brow,  
that we were signed and named and claimed  
in baptism,  
as God's own.

And it is that same cross,  
a silent proclamation of God's love,  
which recalls us from that which  
will disappear,  
to that which will abide and last...  
forever.

Do you recall the words of the Prophet Joel,  
which we heard this evening,  
and which we use as the Verse  
sung prior to the Gospel,  
throughout this lenten season?

"Return to the Lord your God, for God is  
gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in  
steadfast love."

Or do you remember the words of St. Paul who,  
in writing to the church in Corinth  
announced,

"Now is the acceptable time;  
now is the day of salvation!"

This day, this season, invites us once again,  
to return to where we belong,  
to set our hearts on that treasure  
which will not fade,  
to be a community of people,  
who have allowed God's grace to  
prevail in our lives.

And as we do that, we may discover a  
surprising thing...  
the repentance and conversion of heart,  
to which we are called,  
during this lenten season,  
are not nearly as frightening as we  
had imagined.

For rather than leading us to discouragement,  
or to an oppressive concern with our  
own failures,  
they, instead, serve as a pathway  
returning us a life-giving hope.

For only when the debris  
and dust  
and ashes

that prevent new life  
are cleared away,  
may we truly grow and live as the  
redeemed people of God.

Only when we abandon our own stubborn wanderings,  
might we be given the very treasure  
which we sought all along.

Yes... we are made of dust...  
but perhaps there is a certain grace  
in that.

For, finally,  
the final word does not rest with us,  
either in our failures  
or in our faithfulness.  
but in a gracious and loving God who  
calls us,  
yet again,  
to return.