A year ago, faithful people all over the world stood outside their church doors and blessed fresh green palms on Palm Sunday.

I did that at my church in Santa Rosa where I was then serving, and many of you did that here, too.

We took our palms, and marched inside with hymns on our lips, and we evoked the memory of our ancestors as they greeted Jesus entering Jerusalem.

Then, as we carried our palms into Holy Week, we also remembered that the joy of Jesus entering Jerusalem turned to the pain and agony of Jesus on the Cross. The palms represent a collision of images that we know too well in life – triumph and tragedy, joy and sorrow, life and death.

Over the past year, some of these palms were set aside, and dried out and cracked. A few days ago, these palms were burned to make the ashes we use tonight.

Soon we will smear these ashes from Palm Sunday on our foreheads, and we will hear the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

What a very strange thing we do tonight – what a very strange thing.

Tonight we hear prayers about our “wretchedness” and we have these grimy ashes smeared on our forehead.

What a very strange thing we do tonight.

These ashes are stark reminders of the inescapable truth that our bodies, one day, will become as ash – dust to dust.

It is not an easy or comfortable thought – personally, I’d rather think about something else.

Why do we do this?

I would suggest something very powerful is happening on this Ash Wednesday.

I believe there is a blessing beneath the ashes.

With the ashes on our forehead, we hear the promise that everything that harms and hurts us will be made as ash – burned away. All that wounds us will be gone like puffs of smoke.

What will be left will be made whole, new, healed.

Sometimes this is hard to see. Sometimes all we see are the ashes from the wreckage and debris of life.

But the ashes on our foreheads declare that there is more to life than the griminess of death; that we will reach Easter, however long it takes.
A little more than a year ago, I was in Santa Rosa when Sonoma County was devastatated by a massive wildfire that claimed more than 40 lives and destroyed 9,000 structures. A dozen families in my parish lost everything, though thankfully none were killed.

In the days following the fires, the entire community was in a deep state of shock. The fires were all we thought about, all we talked about.

Then something else began to happen. Small signs began popping up in store windows. The words were written on leaflets, handed out on street corners.

I found this leaflet on a sidewalk in front of my church, and I’ve kept it posted in my office ever since.

"From the ashes we will rise."

We don’t get to Easter without first climbing out of the ashes first.

"From the ashes we will rise."

The ashes on our forehead tonight remind us that each day is a new gift for us. Each day is a resurrection, the resurrection that began with Jesus Christ long ago and continuing tonight.

From the ashes we will rise.

Savor every day; and give thanks for this day. You won’t get this day again. And be awake to the newness and the possibilities that tomorrow brings. Don’t slide through life.

No matter our challenges, no matter our setbacks, no matter what losses we endure, let’s be who God created us to be.

From the ashes we will rise.

Look for God’s blessings in the ordinary moments of this extraordinary life that we’ve been given.

The ashes remind us again to put first things first: the people we love, the people who love us, the relationships we hold dear, and the God who loves us extravagantly, unconditionally, and eternally.

All of us are connected to each other, as indeed, we are connected to every human being, every animal, every tree and rock, every speck of dust – and every speck of stardust in the universe.

This is the deepest meaning of Lent that begins tonight with these ashes on our foreheads.

Dust to dust, stardust to stardust.

Let’s live like we know it.

From the ashes we will rise. AMEN