The Rev. James Richardson  
Ash Wednesday 2020

“For he himself knows whereof we are made; we are but dust.”  
— Psalm 103:14

Today, as we do on this day once a year, we will smear ashes on our foreheads, and hear these sobering words: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

This is the one day of the year that the Church sets aside to remind us of the frailty and uncertainty of life, and indeed, to remind us of our mortality.

I’m not sure we really need much reminding of that this year. Reminders of our mortality seem everywhere.

I’ve been leading Ash Wednesday services for the past 20 years; the words are always the same, and my sermons are not much different from year to year. Yet, each year, I find new power in this day. But It isn’t in the words. It’s in the ashes. It took a complete stranger and non-church goer to teach me how. Let me tell you:

As you may recall, I was the priest-in-charge at the Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa in October 2017. That month, enormous wildfires raged through Sonoma, Napa and Lake counties, claiming the lives of 44 people and 9,000 structures. Twelve families in my congregation lost everything, but thankfully none lost their lives. Half the congregation evacuated.

The fires raged for a month. We thought they would never end. We began marking time — marking the calendar — not by the date, but by which day of the fire we were in.

On the second Sunday of the fires, and that would be the 13th day of the fires, we had many people at our worship. Many of them I did not recognize. When worship concluded, a young man came up and introduced himself. He was Gregory Roberts, a professor at Sonoma State University. Professor Roberts asked me if I could connect him with people who had lost their homes in the fires.

He was hoping they would provide a handful of ash from the ruins of their home. He was an art professor, and he and his students would use these ashes in the glaze on ceramics.
Each homeowner would get back a unique piece of pottery with their ash used in the glaze. From the ugliness and pain of these ashes, something new and beautiful would emerge.

Those who had lost homes would have something to hold in their hands representing not only their loss, but also life beginning anew.

I agreed to help. Professor Roberts gave me ten kits with instructions inside on how to collect and return ashes to his studio.

That evening, I posted on my Facebook page that I had these ash collection kits, and to contact me to get one.

I wasn’t thinking much about this, but I had set my Facebook to “public,” meaning anyone on Facebook could see my post. Anyone.

By the next day, my posting had been shared with more than 2,000 people on Facebook, and I was flooded with requests from people all over Sonoma County for ash collection kits.

So began hundreds of conversations with people who had lost everything in the fires. I’ve never had an experience like this.

Very few of these people had any connection to a church – any church – but it didn’t matter. For days, I heard their stories of loss and pain.

I also heard amazing stories of hope.

I ended up putting together a small team at my church to assemble more ash collection kits and mail or bring them to people who asked for them.

Professor Roberts and his students eventually made these ceramics mixing the glaze with the ashes of each home.

Each piece of pottery looked like a small Round Barn, which was a beloved local landmark that burned in the fires.

The ceramics were displayed for a time at a public gallery and then given to the homeowners who had lost their homes.

I’ve reflected many times about why Professor Roberts’ Sonoma Ash Project spoke to so many people.

I think it is for the same reason we smear these dirty, sooty reminders of disaster on our foreheads every year.

It is in the ashes we find hope. In the ashes we can see the promise of new life.

But that seems so counterintuitive. How is it that in the ashes – the remnants of what was and won’t be again – that we can feel what will be new again?

And how is it that we can sense the blessings emerging from the dust of death – these blessings that I can only describe as Holy?
I think this sense of blessing and holiness comes not from words, or learned theology books, or sermons. This sense of blessing, I believe, comes from the ashes themselves. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. And remember from dust you shall return.

We began as star dust, we will return to start dust, and by the Grace of God we live again. From the ashes we will rise. With the ashes on our foreheads today, something deeply, deeply powerful and grace-filled is at work in us that is hard to explain – and that maybe doesn’t need explaining.

I can try to persuade you with my words that all of us will experience new life; and I can try to assure you that the tragedies of this life won’t get the last word; and I can proclaim to you that even at the grave we will sing, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

But to know any of this – to truly know this – we need to touch the blessing, and we need the blessing to touch us. And that is why artists make pottery from ashes, and that is why we smear these ashes on our forehead this day. From the ashes we will rise. All of us, no one is left behind. Today, we touch the blessing and the blessing touches us.

AMEN