

Some years ago, my wife Amy and I were driving from Georgia down to Florida and visions of palm trees and sunshine and golden beaches danced in our heads. As we drove along the interstate, we came to the Georgia-Florida state line. We smiled at the bright blue sign along the highway that read, “Welcome to Florida: The Sunshine State!”

But a few miles down the road, we came to another sign. This one was made of wood, and it stood in the edge of a farmer’s field facing the traffic. It had been hand painted, and it read, “Welcome to Florida. State mortality rate - 100%. Do you know Jesus?”

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I imagine that if I ever had a chance to sit down with the person or persons who had erected that hand-painted sign next to the interstate, we would find that we have many sharp disagreements about much of Christian theology. I imagine that we come from very different places when it comes to sin, grace, salvation, redemption, and God’s ultimate plans for humankind.

But there’s no arguing with their statistics. It’s true. The state mortality rate in Florida is indeed 100%, the same as it is in Georgia, the same as it is in Texas, the same as it is in every community on the face of the earth.

It’s not a concept that we like to think about very often or for too long, but I don’t think I’m telling you anything that you didn’t already know. Every one of us in this room, from the very oldest to the very youngest, will someday die.

In a sense, that’s part of what the ashes communicate. Every forehead gets marked. Every name has a number, and every number will be called. Eventually, everything that we have been, everything that we are now, and everything that we ever will be, will become dust. In our American, I can do anything I want and I don’t need anything or anyone culture, we don’t like to admit that we are broken, that we are sinful, that we are finite.

But this is a day for confession. And to confess simply means to tell the whole truth. So this day is a chance for us to tell the truth about ourselves, to confess to our Creator that we are not the superstars that we make ourselves out to be. This is a day for us to face the truth that one of these days, our bodies and the bodies of everyone we’ve ever known and loved will turn to dust and ashes. This day is a chance for us to come clean by admitting that we are dirty.

But notice, friends, that we do not haphazardly apply the ashes with a random smudge. Notice, friends, that each and every forehead gets marked with ashes, but the ashes are applied in the shape of the cross. And that is also a confession.

Because the final destination of this Lenten journey that begins today is not the abandonment, suffering, pain, and death of Good Friday. Make no mistake. Good Friday is indeed a stop on this Lenten journey. But it's not the final destination. The final destination of the journey that begins here today is the joy of Easter Sunday. The Lenten journey that begins with ashes and dust today ends in the wonderment and new life found in the empty tomb.

And that's the gospel foolishness that we confess as Christians. The gospel foolishness that we confess is that because of the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus of Nazareth, death is not the final word for us.

The gospel foolishness that we confess is that we were dead in our transgressions, we were dead in our sin, we were so completely infected by sin that we could never possibly hope to extricate ourselves, so God did the dirty work for us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel foolishness that we confess is that God took the cross, what was meant to be the ultimate sign of death and domination, what was meant to be the preferred method of the powers that be for state-sponsored executions, and God bent that symbol into a sign of hope, a sign of life, a sign that no matter how broken and deathly we are, no matter how badly we've messed up, all is not lost.

So as you come forward today to receive the imposition of ashes, come confessing your mortality and finitude. Come confessing that you are broken, that you are in need of redeeming, and that you couldn't ever possibly hope to save yourself.

But also come confessing that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. Come confessing that death is not the final word. Come confessing that there is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, that will ever be able to separate you from the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Come confessing that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, so though Good Friday is coming, Easter Sunday is coming, too.

Thanks be to God. Amen.