

Out of the Dust
John 20:1-18
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18, NRSV)

*All this pain,
I wonder if I'll ever find my way,
I wonder if life could really change, at all.*

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
That's what we say at burials, isn't it?
"Seeing that the earthly life of our brother
has come to an end, we commit his body to be buried,
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I don't like to hear those words.
Hearing those words means that I'm at the grave, grieving.
They remind me of loss. They remind me of my mortality.
"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

I've buried two people in my life so far.
I don't mean metaphorically.
I don't mean "I buried them," as we sometimes say,
when we attend a funeral or graveside service.
I've been to many of those.
No, I mean, "buried," literally.

The first was my grandpa, Irvin Leroy Schloneger.
He died in 1993, eighty-two years old.
After his funeral service, we all went out to the graveyard.
The pastor shared some scriptures and recited those dreaded words – can you say them?
"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."
Then grandpa's casket was lowered into the ground,
and my dad and uncles took shovels and started filling the hole with the dirt piled beside it.
I just watched.

After a while, my dad looked up and raised his shovel, offering it to me.
I shook my head no.
No, dad, I did not want to bury grandpa.
But dad's red eyes kept looking, kept asking and encouraging.
I took his shovel,
not because *I* wanted to,
but because *he* wanted me to.
Maybe he needed me to.

So I joined the others at work,
moving earth into grandpa's grave.
And as we were filling in one hole,
it felt to me as if another one was opening up.
I cried for the first time, mourning grandpa.
The sound of the dirt landing in the bottom of the hole
seemed so cold, so hollow, so final, so empty.

Whump, whump, whump.
Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
dirt on my Sunday shoes, dirt on my only suit.

Early on the first day of the week,
while it was still dark,
Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke,
John begins his Easter story in the dark.
He begins his Easter story before creation has woken up.
John's gospel as a whole begins the same way.
It begins not with a birth, not with a manger,
not with angels and shepherds and a star.
No, John chapter 1, verse 1, begins "In the beginning."
In the beginning, the Word was with God and the Word was God.
There's Jesus in Genesis, for through him all things were made.

Of course, in Genesis, in the beginning,
the earth was like a tomb, absent of life;
it was a formless void, Genesis says, and darkness covered the face of the deep.
And after God made the heavens and the earth,
God's hands got dirty.
Taking wet dirt, dampened dust,
God made a human, Adam.
The name Adam comes from the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*.
Adam, in name and being, comes from the ground,
just as the word "human" comes from the Latin *humus*,
the fertile, most organic layer of the soil that will break down no further.
The Lord God, like a careful gardener, prepared and shaped this compost to hold life.
And then God put into it, breathed into it, the breath of life, making a living being.
Earth, ash, dust. Breath. Life!

God then planted a garden in Eden,
and placed the human in it.
Out of the ground, the LORD God made to grow
every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.
And it was good, it was very good.

But the first human beings, Adam and Eve,
sinned against God,
and they were sent out of God's Garden.
They had to return to the ground from which they were taken,
and Adam had to work it, till it, and weed it.

For mixed in the compost, the humus,
was the venom sting of the serpent.
The *adamah* was poisoned, the *humus* was polluted.
Because this was the ground from which human beings grew
this was the ground to which they were destined to return.
Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
Life and death.

This is how the world works. This is what everyone knows.
There is life. And there is death. Nothing more.
One is clenched tightly, clung to, and prolonged
while the other is avoided, kept at a distance, sanitized for the sake of the living.
We don't want graveyard ground on our Sunday shoes.
We don't want cemetery soil on our Sunday suits.

The second person I buried was a young woman in Mozambique.
She was in her twenties, and she died of AIDS.
After the funeral, we all went to her homestead
where her grave had been dug.
The pastor shared some scriptures and then shared those words:
"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Her casket was lifted and lowered into the ground,
and we started filling the grave.
Because there was only one shovel,
those who had gathered -- men and women --
bent over the pile and moved the earth by hand,
pushing and pulling and shoving the dirt into the empty void.
After the hole was filled, and it was time to go home,
everyone went to a basin at the edge of the property to wash.
For most, this wasn't just for the sake of cleanliness.
No, this was also so that graveyard ground didn't follow them home.
They didn't want the dirt of death on their hands or underneath their fingernails.

When Mary saw the broken seal on the borrowed tomb
she must have thought of it like death's exhaust pipe
blowing its dirt sky high into the atmosphere.
And she ran away from it.

Of course she did.
Mary didn't want to breathe the dirty air
that she knew from those nighttime mornings --
the air that weighed so heavily,
thick with the demons that she knew oh-too-well.

She had been saved from seven of them,
and she knew that they can slowly choke the life living inside of you.

Mary knew those demons.

I think we do, too.

They are the ones that won't let your mind stop turning, burning, worrying.
They poison the ground and contaminate the air, causing weeds to grow:
when our lives have not gone as planned, when ones we love die way too soon,
when the healing we want for ourselves and others doesn't come,
when changes that we didn't ask for come anyway.

They force us to adapt, to adjust, to carry on, as we make our way to the tomb.

They can poison the ground with greed, with lust, with addictions, and deceit.

They threaten to choke the life from us.

We fear that broken relationships may not be reconciled.

We fear that our work has been in vain.

We fear that unemployment or retirement or poverty or sickness
makes us meaningless, unimportant, impotent.

As individuals, we know some of those demons.

But together, collectively, we know each and every one of them.

I *know* we do.

They form the ecology of our existence.

They make us want to wipe off our hands and to brush off our clothes.

They make us want to run as fast as we can -- away, away from the burial grounds,
for that ground is poisoned, and we don't want it with us, we don't want it near us,
and, most of all, we don't want others to see it on us.

*All this earth,
could all that is lost ever be found,
could a garden come up from this ground, at all?*

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

When we say those words, when we hear them,
we think that they are meant for the dead and not the living.
We intend them for the grave, not for life.

But the thing is, after Eden, God never finished gardening.
God never removed the dirt from God's hands.
God never completely shook Adam's dust from God's feet.
God the gardener began planting and transplanting people.
God came to a childless couple, Abraham and Sarah,
and led them away to the land that had been prepared for them,
God promised them, covenanted with them,

saying that whole new people would grow from them.

Exodus tells us that when Abraham's people were enslaved in Egypt, God claimed them, uprooted them, and transplanted them to grow in a new garden.¹

Referring to Israel's liberation from Egypt, Exodus chapter 15, verse 17 says that God **planted them – planted them** -- on the mountain of God's own possession. God the gardener.

And when Israel was exiled in Babylon, God promised them a return to the garden.

The prophet Jeremiah said, in chapter 31, verse 11,

¹¹ *[T]he LORD will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.*

¹² *They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;*

they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—

the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,

the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,

and they will sorrow no more. "

Like a well-watered garden.

God is a gardener,

and gardeners aren't afraid to get into the soil,

to get their hands dirty.

God reaches into *adamah*, the humus, the ground,

and turns the compost,

so that life, new life, can grow out of the death and decay mixed in.

God is a gardener.

This means that God doesn't remain separate and removed from you,

God is not distant from you,

from the brokenness of this world.

God isn't an absentee landlord.

No, God is a gardener, working the soil of you within the soil of us.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

A man says to Mary,

"Woman, why are you weeping?

Whom are you looking for?"

It's the gardener, she thinks.

Mary doesn't recognize the one standing right in front of her.
Some say that she didn't recognize Jesus
because her eyes were clouded with the tears of grief,
but I think Mary was seeing Jesus more clearly than she ever had before.

Jesus the gardener.
The one who smells like the stuff of creation.
The one who walks in the garden in the evening breeze,
the one who produces fruit,
the one covered with the *adamah*, the humus, the soil,
from which the shoots of life sprout,
the one who sets the food on the table so that others may eat,
the one who puts his whole body into the compost so that God's seeds may grow.

Jesus is the holy God,
getting mixed in with the humus,
purifying and cleansing the poison that contaminates the soil of our bodies and world,
saving us from the sin that dooms us for the tomb,
the place of darkness and despair,
so that God's creation can burst forth and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Into this soil of our existence,
God brings forth new life through his Spirit.
But make no mistake,
this new life, this new creation
is a gardener's dirt-in-the-fingernails work of passion.
This is the ecology of resurrection.ⁱⁱ

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!

Resurrection is organic.
New creation emerges out of the old.
Out of the shell of a seed,
out of the compost,
of death and decay,
new life springs forth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Resurrection is organic.
It's from the ground up,
from the first Adam to the last Adam,
a bodily resurrection.
"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,"
does not describe our journey from life to death.

No, in Christ, those words describe our journey from life to life!

*¹⁷If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new!*

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!

To those struggling in the darkness,
in the formless void of death and despair,
to those of you with discouragement and doubt,
grief and guilt,
to those of you struggling with fear and failure,
and shame and shock
to those of you with pain and problems
and worry and woes
and regret and remorse
and sorrow and sin, hear this:

*God makes beautiful things,
God makes beautiful things out of the dust.
God makes beautiful things,
God makes beautiful things,
out of us.*

In the name of Jesus,
by the power of his Holy Spirit,
what goes down
will at one time rise back up.
What goes down
will at one time rise back up!

Jesus told Mary, "Go tell the others.
I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."
Mary Magdalene went and announced this to the disciples.
"I have seen the Lord!" she said.

And now you are witnesses.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
from the compost of our condemnation:

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

From the soil of our sin:

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

From the ground of our grief:

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

From that open tomb
blows the humus of a new creation:
Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ will come again!
And all of God's people say, Amen.

ⁱ William P. Brown, "The Gardener and the Groundling: The Ecology of Resurrection," *Journal for Preachers* (Easter 2009), 35.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*