

# CROSS

# Connection



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Our first child was born just a couple of weeks before Ash Wednesday. Our new family of three traveled the dark gravel roads of rural Kansas to a small white church where my husband was the pastor. It was the first time people had gotten to see our newborn, and I was as proud as any young mother could be. I sat in the front pew, my arms full of baby—*my* baby—and listened attentively to the service, enjoying the novel opportunity to be part of the congregation. When the appropriate time arrived: I went and knelt at the altar rail, so that Matthew could place an ashen cross on my forehead. *“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* Amen.

And then, my beloved husband, my best friend, the father of the infant in my arms, turned and dared to place his ashy black finger on my daughter’s pristine sleeping forehead and pronounce, *“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return,”* solemnly making the sign of the cross on the brow that hadn’t even experienced the cross of baptism yet.

My reaction was immediate and visceral. I wanted to snatch my sweet baby away from him, to run from the room, to declare, *“No. Not my baby. Not her. Death doesn’t get to have her. Take me. Leave her alone.”*

Except, of course, that death lays claim to us all. Whether we like, acknowledge, allow, accept, welcome it...or not. The dust of death clings to us from the moment we draw our first breath, until our last. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

This year, Ash Wednesday is on Valentine’s Day. They seem like strange holidays to share a day, on the surface. Pink hearts, red roses, candy, romance on one hand...dark, grit, ash, repentance on the other. As disconnected as these two observances seem to be, there is also a wonderful similarity between them. Those of us who choose to mark this day with an ash-emblazoned cross are bearing witness to a love that is far greater and more enduring than the loved associated with Valentine’s Day.

Those ashy crosses we wear should serve to remind us of two things: one, that we are dust. And two: the cross saves us from death. That we are loved by the One who’s death has destroyed death, and who’s rising has opened to us the way of everlasting life. Death may lay claim to us, but in Christ that claim has no merit. No hold. No power. God reacts with all the ferocity of a new mother when Death dares lay a finger on her beloved child, *“No. Not my baby. You don’t get to have her. You can have me. But not her.”* What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul?

May God grant us all a blessed Lent.

+Bishop Kristen

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