

Baptismal reaffirmations: Romans 6:1b-11

Remembering our baptism enables us to step out of our old life, at least for a moment.

by [Evan Drake Howard](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

It's still dark on Easter morning as I join other worshipers for our annual sunrise service. We gather on a tree-studded hillside in a cemetery that overlooks a peaceful river. As the first shards of light glisten on silent waters, we sing and pray. Then a pastor stands and asks:

"Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?

"Do you promise, with the help of God's grace, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of Jesus, to resist oppression, to work for justice and peace, and to witness to the compassionate love of God as best you are able?"

Members of the congregation answer, "I do." Then, to signify this renewal of baptismal vows, the pastor takes a sprig of pine, dips it in water and walks around sprinkling the worshipers.

Paul's words in the sixth chapter of Romans suggest that he would approve. His prominent verbs—*buried*, *united*, *freed*—deserve to be chanted with every fling of the pine branch and every splash of water. Buried with Christ in baptism, we are united with him in resurrection, so that we may be freed from sin.

Paul was talking about a misunderstanding in the Roman church. Some believers had interpreted the free gift of forgiveness in Christ as an excuse to continue in sin "that grace may abound." To refute this idea, Paul explained the meaning of baptism. Whereas continuing in sin enslaves us to the passions of the body, dying and rising with Christ frees us for life in the Spirit.

This teaching remains relevant today. What truly frees a person? Money? Power? Success? Our self-intoxicated culture lauds the efficacy of these and other

counterfeits. But Paul has a different view. His first emphatic verb is *buried*. Anyone who has stood at a graveside and watched a casket lowered into the earth will understand his point. There's a difference between being dead and being buried. Not until the casket is lowered and covered with dirt is the process of dying truly finalized. The analogy applies to the soul too. Just as a dead body becomes a smelly health hazard if not placed in a grave, so will sinful habits pollute the soul if they are not buried with Christ.

The only way we can do this is by keeping alive the meaning of our baptism. In this way we can experience the freedom made possible by grace. To be buried with Christ is to acknowledge our powerlessness over our sinful nature. It will not happen all at once. Burial is a process. Just as the interment of a body requires hard work and the use of a shovel or backhoe, so burying guilt, fear and despair demands an ongoing effort and reliance on the Spirit.

The work of burying our most excruciating memories and unmanageable habits will continue for the rest of our lives; some memories and habits won't be laid to rest until we are. But returning to our baptism—praying our understanding of it, meditating on the healing made possible through Christ—offers peace and hope in the struggle. The actual baptism is important, but no more so than the discipline of applying its meaning to our deepest wounds and vulnerabilities. When Martin Luther was assaulted by an overwhelming temptation, he cried out, “But I’ve been baptized!” This is the first cry on the road to freedom.

Paul's second verb is *united*. Achieving oneness with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection unleashes in us the same power that raised him from the dead. We share in the victory won, not by resuscitation, but by resurrection. Again, there's a difference. What is born in us is not a reworking of the old life; rather, like the historical Jesus who became the risen Christ on Easter, we receive from him and in him a life we did not know before.

Oneness with Christ's resurrection means that an entirely new identity springs up in us. We must live with the wounds of the past, but the hope of a better future becomes the balm that soothes the pain. Remembering our baptism enables us to step out of our old life, at least for a moment, and claim the new resurrection life that Christ has given us.

Paul's third emphatic verb is *freed*. Freed from what? Not temptation. Not the tendency to sin. These demons will torment us as long as we live. Rather, we are freed from the power that sin has over us. Experiencing this freedom is like moving from therapy to spirituality. As helpful as good therapy is, it can only offer support and understanding. But Christ offers grace and forgiveness.

In their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham tell about an Episcopal priest who goes on a directed retreat. The priest confidently tells her confessor, an experienced Jesuit spiritual guide, that over the past year she has grown spiritually and has gained new insights about herself. She says that she has learned, for one thing, that she is insensitive and controlling because she's related to an alcoholic. Upon hearing this, the veteran confessor bristles, pats her hand, and asks, "My dear, do you want forgiveness or an explanation?"

The waters of baptism offer more than explanations. They speak the silent, miraculous language of grace—the language that invites us, in rhythms deeper than words, to be buried, united, freed.