

Raised to Walk in Newness of Life

Philippians 1:20-26

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A few years ago the Louisiana Folklore Society did an article on the baptismal traditions of the St. Paul's Baptist Church in Monroe, Louisiana. St. Paul's is an African-American congregation and for many years they have gathered on the banks of the Ouachita River at a place often used by several congregations for baptisms and church picnics. The bank is covered in grass and slopes gently into the river with a sandy bottom. The elderly members of St. Paul's calls this spot on the river "the old burying ground," because of what the Apostle Paul said about baptism in Romans, "Therefore we have been buried with him [Christ] into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (6:4).

In the flowing currents of the Ouachita River, new believers are plunged beneath the waters symbolically to die with Christ, to be washed clean, and to be raised to begin walking the Way of the resurrection.

For St. Paul's the "old burying ground" is the Ouachita River. For other congregations the old burying ground might be another river or creek or stream or pond or tank. Or the burying ground might be a baptistery or a font inside the church building. Wherever they are and whatever they are, in worship we see them as the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, and the Red Sea, through which the children of Israel passed through on their way to freedom in the promised land. It's also the "glad river" described in Psalm 46, "There is a river, the streams whereof

shall make glad the city of God” (Ps. 46:4) and it is in the book of Revelation, the “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” through the heavenly city (Rev. 22:1).

For all baptisms, and this is true of our baptism of Ray Roberson this morning, we are dramatically acting out dying with Christ and rising with Christ. Baptism is about being washed clean from sin and coming out of the waters to walk in a new way. It is about dying in the old burying ground and rising up in the resurrection. We believe that the resurrected life in Christ begins when Ray comes up out of the water. It starts now and will continue throughout eternity.

So yes, we are burying Ray this morning.

But being buried with Christ and rising with Christ also raises a dilemma and the Apostle Paul gets at it in his own life. In his letter to the small congregation of believers in Philippi, Paul is struggling with his faith and what to think. He is in prison and he knows that it is likely he is going to die. So Paul says, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.” He continues, “I’m really hard pressed as what to do and what to think. If I die and am with Christ, it is far better than anything else I can imagine. But if I live I’ll get to continue with you and work with you. Either way I win but I’m at a dilemma as what to think. (Philippians 1:20-26).

I think Paul gets at Ray’s dilemma exactly. Ray is nothing if not a person with more to do. Projects to complete and new ones to begin, always something going on, always people to help. There is much to do in this life and it is good and blessed and fulfilling. At the same time, the doctors are telling him he has 4 to 6 months, and with some new treatments he’s undergoing, he might stretch it out a

bit longer. So Ray also knows, that he will be with Christ – face to face. And that is even more good and blessed and fulfilling.

So Ray is here preparing for his death. He is here in the “old burying ground” of baptism.

And as Ray came up out of the water this morning, and walked up out of the baptistery, went down the stairs to dry off and change into dry clothes, he also walked in newness of life. He is walking the journey of the resurrected life.

One of the earliest names for the Christian movement was “the Way” (Acts 9:2), because the Christian faith was not understood as a set of ideas or even how you felt, but as a journey down a road. It was and is a Way of life – the Way. It means learning new practices, new habits, new ways of acting and thinking and doing. It is the Way of Jesus Christ, and we walk with Christ and learn to act and do like him. So we learn to serve, not dominate. To forgive, not hold grudges or seek vengeance and learn to receive forgiveness because we learn we have hurt others. We learn to love and not hate. We learn to act with mercy. We learn to listen patiently instead of acting hastily or assuming we always know best. It means opening our arms in grace instead of closing our arms in judgment. This is the Way. It is a journey that begins in these waters of baptism. And it is the journey, the Way that continues through death and beyond. Walking with Christ begins now, and continues forever.

Christians do not walk this road alone. We travel this Way together. Ray walked out of the waters this morning down the stairs to the waiting arms and dry towels of Deacon Bob Choate. Ray is being mentored by Deacon Judy McDonald

and he is best friends with folks like Deacon Ron Watson. For the last ten years we have gathered around Ray and prayed with him in his cancer. And there is a particular bond between Ray and Jim Lemon, who has also had his battle with cancer and made numerous journeys to MD Anderson. These are examples of being the church. Ray does not walk this journey alone. He is in the company of the saints, to use the language of the Apostle Paul.

In other words, we are in this together in Christ. Last Sunday we baptized Hailey Davis, and next Sunday we will dedicate Leo Majis (son of Franta and Betsy). This week we've had two new babies born: Sage and Jade. We have several others preparing for baptisms and more babies on the way. From birth through death we walk with one another in Christ. We carry each other, we lean on each other, we pray for one another, we feed one another in our pot lucks, we cry with one another, we laugh with one another, we worship with one another and we sing with one another. And we don't do this because it is a nice thing (though it is) or because it is a growth strategy (though it might be) or because we're all wonderfully great people all of the time (though we are sometimes). We do this because we are the church, the body of Christ. We are in Christ together.

According to the ancient church, singing together may be one of the most important things we do together in Christ. In the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, instructions were given to congregations on how to do things in church like worship, Holy Communion/Eucharist, baptism, weddings, and funerals. The instructions for all of these practices were to "accompany them with singing."

Austin Heights we sing. We accompany each other with singing. So we sing with Ray this morning at this baptism. We will sing with Ray at his funeral. And

there will be singing with Ray, greeting him in Christ on the other side of the grave.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.