

Resurrection Now
Romans 6:1-4
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

This afternoon at 4:00 our family, along with some friends, will gather at the river – not the beautiful, the beautiful river that some of us used to sing about but the muddy, muddy waters of the Yadkin, which emerges from mountain springs in the Appalachians, flows through our county, becomes the Pee Dee, and eventually pours into the Atlantic – for an old-fashioned Easter baptism.

It will be a first for most if not all of us. I grew up in a country-church-come-to-town and many of the elders in the congregation were veterans of outdoor baptisms – fiberglass baptistries being largely unheard of in country churches – but I have never witnessed a river baptism.

There's a story behind it, of course. Francois, one of Nikki's sons, grew up in the church, but like many others managed to get through childhood and youth without being baptized. At a certain point, it becomes a little embarrassing, and you just move on.

We will sing a couple of the old river songs – “Shall We Gather at the River” and “Down By the Riverside” – and “As I went Down to the River to Pray.” Lynn Rhodes, who was the minister of youth at Wake Forest Baptist Church when Francois was growing up, will officiate.

I don't know if Lynn will quote Paul in the ceremony, but she might. I dare it is more than likely that she will because his statement in Romans 6 has become standard commentary for baptisms over the centuries. You have heard his words many times:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism 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. (Romans 6:1-4)

So commonplace has this language become that we do not realize the significance of what Paul did when he made that declaration.

A bit of context. One of the first things the early Christian preachers, writers and thinkers had to do was to create a new vocabulary for the new reality that had been created after the death of Jesus.

We take our religious language for granted, but the first generation of Christians didn't have a ready-made set of words or images at their disposal.

Ordinary Christians didn't have experiences that were as dramatic as Paul's Damascus Road experience but theirs were no less life-changing. How were they to talk about what they had experienced? How were they describe it?

The best-known language in evangelical circles is one of the latest to be suggested. The author of John's Gospel, writing near the end of the first century, a good 60 years after the death of Jesus, said that the experience had such a dramatic effect on one's life, it was like being born again.

Reading Paul's letters, you can see him searching for the right word, the right image. In his letter to the Ephesians, he described it as being like something as mundane as changing clothes. "*You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self . . . and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*" (4:22-24) He frequently talked about "putting on" Christ the way you would put on a new piece of clothing.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he said, "*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*" (5:17) The old way of seeing and being is no more. It has been replaced by something so new it's like being created all over again.

In the letter to the Roman church, he uses yet another image, one that I think might surprise you, though it too is familiar. "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (12:2) You know the Greek word that is translated "transformed"? Metamorphosis. The word metamorphosis is not an English equivalent of a Greek word. It is the Greek word. We transliterated it into English. It means to change from one form or structure to another. Think caterpillar to a butterfly.

Here's the interesting thing: that's the same word that is translated "transfigured" in the Gospels. We are to be metamorphosized by the renewing of our minds, just as Jesus was metamorphosized on the mountain.

You can see Paul searching for a word, a way to describe a spiritual experience: it's like changing clothes; it's like becoming a new creature; it's like being changed from thing to another -- you know, caterpillar to butterfly.

It is in the text I read earlier, the one we routinely, perhaps unthinkingly, read at baptismal ceremonies, that Paul did something that made it possible for us to talk about "resurrection now," resurrection as a contemporary experience, and not just something that happened to Jesus.

"*We have been buried with him by baptism into death,*" Paul writes, "*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.*" He continues: "*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*"

Do you see what he did? He made a metaphor out of the resurrection. (I think that's what he did. I'm sure Tom Hanks will let me know.) Obviously, the Roman Christians had not experienced a death like Jesus' death, not in a literal sense. Nor had they been raised from the dead as he had.

But something has died – a way of being in the world, a way of valuing and relating that was destructive and stifling -- and something has come to life. "What happened to you is a resurrection of your soul," Paul told the Roman Christians. "It is like being raised from the dead." They knew intuitively what he was talking about. They didn't need to dig out their Greek 101 notes to fud out what a metaphor was. "Yes," they thought when they heard Paul's letter read to the congregation, "that's exactly what it was like."

Remember: he was writing to ordinary Christians like you and me, members of the congregation in Rome. And he was giving them a way to understand their spiritual experience and a way to talk about it.

“Your baptism,” Paul reminded the Roman Christians, “was a celebration of resurrection – Christ’s and yours.” Which is why in the early centuries in the history of the church baptisms were always held on Easter. Baptism is a dual celebration of resurrection.

When I talked with persons who were to be baptized, especially children and youth, I often told them that we were going to perform a pantomime. When I laid them back into the water, we were acting out Christ’s burial, and when they came up out of the water, we were portraying his resurrection and their commitment to follow the Way of Jesus.

Baptism is a metaphor in motion, a bodily proclamation of the Gospel.

(Let me say, almost but not quite parenthetically, that all of what I just said works only if baptism is by immersion. A little denominational partisanship is appropriate here.)

Here’s what I am most anxious to say this morning. Over the years we have restricted the images we have talked about to the beginning point in one’s life in Christ. To be born again, for example, is made to refer to only one event in one’s spiritual journey. But the truth is that there have been rebirths all along the way. Or, to return to Paul’s image, there have been times when faith, once dead, came alive, was resurrected in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

The Gospel is a resurrection faith. That one reason we have such trouble giving up on ourselves or on others we care about.

A couple of weeks ago in a sermon based on the prodigal son I told you about Francois’ friend, Lee, who was addicted to heroin. Francois wrote about Lee in a statement of his faith that Nikki will read at her son’s baptism this afternoon.

In his statement he uses an image that I told you about. You may remember it. “Every inch of happiness that exists in (the addict’s) life is compacted into one needle. The next day, there is no more happiness left in the world because the needle took it all. So, he does it again. And again. Because if he doesn’t all he has waiting for him is depression and sadness.”

Francois says, “My friend hit rock bottom. He had relapsed four times. He had no friends. His community gave up on him. He lost his job. He was kicked out of his apartment.”

He concludes, and this is the part I want you to hear: “I had to be there for him. To encourage him. To hold him accountable. And should he relapse again, to say ‘try harder.’ When my friend works so hard to climb from rock bottom, it is in those moments that I’m reminded of the power greater than I. The power that makes things OK. If it happens again -- if Lee relapses again -- God will make it ok again. And again.”

At its heart, Christianity is a resurrection faith. Its core message – its Gospel – is that life can be OK again, faith once dead can live again, love gone cold can become vibrant again, hope that lay dormant can revive and be life-giving again. And again.

The Gospel, the Easter message of our resurrection faith: *“Like as Christ was raised, even so may you rise to walk in newness of life.”*

Happy Easter. Amen.