

How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

BY ERIC HOWELL

By baptism “you died and were born,” a fourth-century catechism teaches. “The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.” When we are born to new life in those ‘maternal waters,’ we celebrate and receive grace that shapes how we live and die.

Following an extended argument in which the grace given to us through Christ is set over against the sinful nature we inherit from Adam, the Apostle Paul asks: “What shall we say then?” (Romans 6:1, ESV)¹ and the implied answer is clear: grace wins. This is especially clear in the crescendo of his argument: “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:20b-21, ESV).

Immediately Paul recognizes that his argument sets a dangerous theological trap to be sprung. He must now disarm the derivation from his premise of a devious conclusion: namely, since more sin equals more grace, therefore, sin more!

Before the trap can be sprung, Paul spins on the point and asks, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1, ESV) No way! How can we who died to sin still live in it? For Paul, the gift of God’s grace is an invitation to a new way of life, a radical discipleship to Jesus Christ that puts to death the old life and gives birth to new life.

To make this point, Paul turns to baptism. He is not trying to convince readers of the importance of baptism, nor is he making an evangelistic appeal. Rather, writing to people who (presumably) have already been baptized, in the weightiest language imaginable Paul interprets baptism as a metaphorical and effective act that changes people as decidedly as birth and death do.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4

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Perhaps the image of walking “in newness of life” includes the promise of life after death for those who are saved, but in light of the case Paul is making for the shape of life on this side of the grave, it seems that walking in newness of life is the walk that we begin dripping wet as we step out of the baptistery.² In other

words, Paul is saying that grace is not a convenient equation for cancelling the penalty of sin, it is a gifted newness of life in Christ that is witnessed to and shaped by baptism. Baptismal grace is the frequent memory of the dying-and-rising of our own baptisms, which is revealed again to us each time the Church gathers for this celebration. It is the awakening vision that now our lives are caught up in Christ as those over whom death has no ultimate dominion. Christians are to live like this and die like this.

LIVING TOWARD A GOOD DEATH

At fifty-three years old, Eugene O’Kelly was in the prime of his life and by all accounts his life was a prime one to live. He was in the third year of a six-year term as the Chairman and CEO of KPMG (US), one of the largest accounting firms in the world. Though he and his wife dreamed of someday retiring to Arizona, he loved his work with so much energy and drive that he would go to extreme lengths to land big-time clients. On one occasion when he was having a hard time scheduling a meeting, O’Kelly learned the client’s travel plans and booked a seat next to him on a flight from Los Angeles to Sydney, Australia. During the flight, he won the client’s account. As soon as they arrived in Australia, O’Kelly boarded the next plane and flew back home. He was good at what he did and dedicated to it.

But in a moment his world changed. In May 2005, O’Kelly was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor and given three months to live. He faced the very real question: What would you do if you had only three months to live?

Prior to his diagnosis O’Kelly had not considered his own death carefully at all. He was too busy living life and working too hard to be attentive to his own mortality. Faced with death, he applied the same intentional, focused approach to dying as he had to working. It was all he knew how to do. He

quickly put into place a succession plan at KPMG and left his position as soon as he could. He wrote letters to old friends. He spent more time at home with his wife and family. He tightened his circle of friends closer as the months crept on and his death loomed near.

Reflecting on these experiences in his memoir, *Chasing Delight*, O'Kelly came to see his diagnosis as a gift. Knowing he had only a short time to live, it was as though he decided to fight the good fight of dying well as a blessing to his family and friends, and to run the race that was set before him. This is what he concluded:

I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live. You think that to put those two sentences back to back, I must be joking. Or crazy. Perhaps that I had lived a miserable, unfulfilled life, and the sooner it was done, the better. ... Hardly. I loved my life. Adored my family. Enjoyed my friends, the career I had, the big-hearted organizations I was part of, the golf I played. And I'm quite sane. And also quite serious: The verdict I received the last week of May 2005—that it was unlikely I'd make it to my daughter Gina's first day of eighth grade, the opening week of September—turned out to be a gift. Honestly. Because I was forced to think seriously about my own death. Which meant I was forced to think more deeply about my life than I'd ever done.³

Like many people who face the reality of their own mortality, O'Kelly experienced an unlikely awakening. For years, life, and all that it asked and required from him, was all he saw. But now, with death in front of him, he was able to see life in richer, deeper, fuller ways. He wrote,

I'd attained a new level of awareness, one I didn't possess the first 53 years of my life. It's just about impossible for me to imagine going back to that other way of thinking, when this new way has enriched me so. I lost something precious, but I also gained something precious.⁴

BECOMING AWARE OF BAPTISMAL GRACE

O'Kelly experienced the gift of life in the shadow of death. This is surely an analogue of the grace that we experience in Christian baptism. Indeed, it is this baptismal grace that prepares us to live well and die well. But to understand our baptisms in this way, we need to clear some ground around the baptistery and what we do there.

Let me place an image in your mind. The baptistery at our church is outside. It is actually an old cow trough left over from the days when our land was a dairy farm. We fill it up with water to bury persons by baptism into Christ's death and raise them to walk in new life. We come out of the sanctuary into the sunshine and gather around the trough to sing a song, hear a testimony, confess our faith together, and clap. It is the one moment

when our loafers get shelved for our down-to-the-river boots, and we love it. Celebrating baptism in this open-air, no-walls manner is my favorite moment in ministry – by a wide margin. So, when I suggest we might need to “clear some ground” around the baptistery to speak of baptismal grace, that is coming from someone who swings a bare foot from the grass and

fire ants up over into the baptistery and back out dripping wet.

The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a sacrament, an ordinance, and a sign. Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an augury, for it is an omen of the Christian journey of dying to self and rising to new life.

In our thinking, we often construct walls around the baptismal moment, separating it from the rest of the Christian life that follows. For instance, some of us as evangelicals understand baptism as the culmination of a period of preparation. We pair baptism with the “walk down the aisle” as the public marks that a person (often a child) has made a decision

for Christ and is ready to become a Christian. This is well and good, but it is also incomplete. Paul says that baptism is not just dying to the life we had before, but also rising to new life. In baptism we should see an image of the entire Christian life.

The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a *sacrament* to highlight the mysterious work that God does through its practice, as an *ordinance* to emphasize our obedience to Jesus’ command to perform it, and as a *sign* to indicate the symbolic nature of the lowering and raising of the candidate. Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an *augury*, for it is an omen of what will happen in the future. If you fear that the word is too bleak for this purpose, consider the brighter connotation of it in these opening lines from William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
 and a heaven in a wild flower,
 hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
 and eternity in an hour.

Blake expresses a mystical belief that the microcosm symbolizes the macrocosm such that it is possible to experience the latter by contemplating the former. In the grain of sand observed with patience, the whole world comes into view. In the wild flower experienced with each of our senses and all our being, we really do see heaven. From this perspective, the palm of one’s hand is as large as infinity and an hour is as long as eternity.

Certainly baptism is an augury in Blake's sense. When we view baptism with our whole being, with all our senses, we can see the death and resurrection of Christ and our own death and resurrection. The movement we see in baptism is the shape of what is to come: the Christian journey of dying to self and rising to new life. So, with apologies to William Blake, I offer a pastor's view:

To see our world in a moment expand:
death and life in an augur...
hold a man in the palm of your hand,
and lower him into the water.

Baptism as an *augury* is not just a celebration of the moment, but the means by which we see the shape of the whole Christian life.

While we are clearing ground around baptism, let us also clear some ground around grace. We should not limit grace to merely the means by which salvation is transacted. Surely by God's grace we are saved, and to this truth we give testimony in our baptisms. But while salvific grace finds full expression in baptism, it is not finished with us there. The full expression of grace in our baptisms signifies the presence and power of grace that will sustain us through our lives. As the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement observes,

Baptism is the total immersion in the choking water of death, from which we emerge in the joy of breathing once again, of "breathing the Spirit." For the water, changed from lethal into life-giving, embodies the resurrectional power of the Spirit, of which it is a natural symbol.⁵

Echoing the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3, Clement beautifully expresses the baptismal and spiritual shape of the Christian life:

The Spirit, then, shapes the person who has been renewed in water, which has become maternal, just as [the Spirit] brooded over the original waters, but this time his work is *re-creation*. In the water, the hard growths of the soul, the callouses of the heart, are dissolved. The person becomes once again tractable and receives a form of life, which is symbolized by the white garment put on after he or she emerges, the symbol of the glorified body.⁶

So, now we have cleared a bit of ground around both baptism and grace. Let the baptismal waters splash out of the cow trough onto the grass and dirt, and flow under and around, and rise and cover our down-to-the-river boots. Let them continue rising all around us until the flood of these Spirit-hovered waters brings continual re-creation to the lives of all the saints. It is the *Church's* baptism, after all.

In a fourth century book of catechetical instruction attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem we find this striking image of baptism: “By this action you died and were born. The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.”⁷ For those who are born to new life in the ‘maternal waters,’ grace is more expansive than the means to a profession of faith. Grace is

The funeral service echoes the baptismal service. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.

the whole gift of God to the whole person for the whole of life and the whole of salvation. Clement explains it this way:

Life in the spirit means gradually becoming aware of ‘baptismal grace,’ and this awareness transforms the whole person. The baptismal sequence of death and resurrection is repeated throughout

our pilgrimage, enlightening its ‘initiatory’ moments. When everything seems lost, baptismal grace, if we pay heed to it, can convert a situation of death into one of resurrection, an apparent deadlock into a necessary breakthrough. We have to learn—and this is the whole meaning of asceticism—to get round obstacles, to tear away dead skin, to let the very life of Christ arise in us by the power of his resurrection. Each present moment has to become baptismal: a moment of anguish and death if I seek to cling to it and so experience its non-existence, but a moment of resurrection if I accept it humbly as ‘present’ in both senses of the word. ... We come finally to the moment of agony when we are overwhelmed by the waters of death. Through our baptism, according to the measure of our faith, they will be transformed into the womb of eternity.⁸

CELEBRATING AT TWO BLESSED GRAVES

Eugene O’Kelly came to realize that his central question might have been asked years before his diagnosis, not just weeks before his death: how can life become filled with the awareness of gift? As Christians we should be asking how our lives can become suffused with the awareness of baptismal grace.

We might take our cue from St. Benedict of Nursia, who instructed his monks to “Keep death daily before your eyes.”⁹ The fourth-century desert mystic Evagrius shared similar wisdom: “Always keep your death in mind and do not forget the eternal judgment, then there will be no fault in your

soul.”¹⁰ This ancient Christian wisdom is irony for sure: we most fully experience life when we are most mindful of our deaths. Similarly, we most fully experience baptismal grace when we contemplate the reality of death. Perhaps this is so because the grace that we will receive for resurrection upon our deaths is so richly augured in baptism.

In this way baptismal grace puts us in touch with what Paul called “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” (Philippians 3:10)—a power that can shape how we endure suffering right now, live like Christ, and one day die like Christ. This resurrection power not only assures life with God after death, but transforms daily life before God in light of the coming rebirth in “the womb of eternity.”

In *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Tom Long explores the liturgical, dramatic, and narrative connections that run between baptismal services and Christian funerals. He writes,

When a Christian dies, the church gathers to act out the story of what this death means in the light of the gospel, but it is a story that began long before the person died. It is a story that began at baptism. Since a funeral is built on the foundation of baptism, we cannot fully grasp the dramatic aspects of a funeral without seeing them in baptism as well.¹¹

Just as I have attempted to reclaim baptism as an augury for the life of discipleship that follows, so Long is concerned to reclaim the funeral as both an echo of that Christian pilgrimage and an augury of the life with God after death. In his view,

A Christian funeral is a continuation and elaboration of the baptismal service. If baptism is a form of worshipful drama performed at the beginning of the Christian life, a funeral is—or should be—an equally dramatic, and symmetrical, performance of worship performed at the end of life....

The funeral, then, is not just a connection of inspiring words said on the occasion of someone’s death. It is, rather, a dramatic event in which the church acts out what it believes to be happening from the perspective of faith.¹²

The funeral service echoes the baptismal service. In both cases the congregation celebrates and receives God’s grace for a person’s life shaped by dying and rising. In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.

When John Chrysostom teaches in the fourth century, “Nothing is more blessed than that grave over which all rejoice, both angels and human

beings and the Master of angels,” the blessed grave he is speaking about is the baptistry.¹³ By God’s grace may we come to receive both the watery grave and the earthen grave as blessed, as auguries of new life in Christ, and therefore as occasions for rejoicing in hope.

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently develops this theme in a letter to Eberhard Bethge. Because throughout the Old Testament redemption is on this side of the grave, Bonhoeffer notes, we make a mistake in emphasis when we read Christian hope as exclusively redemption on the other side of the grave. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009), 447.

3 Eugene O’Kelly, *Chasing Daylight: How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 1.

4 *Ibid.*, 6.

5 Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 103.

6 *Ibid.*, 104.

7 Quoted in Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 105.

8 *Ibid.*, 106

9 *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4.47

10 Benedicta Ward, trans., *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 63.

11 Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 79.

12 *Ibid.*, 81.

13 John Chrysostom, “On Colossians Homily 7,” in Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, eds., *John Chrysostom, The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 77.



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