

What's dead can die (Romans 6:1b-11)

It's a beautiful Sunday morning, until the pastor breaks the mood.

by [Liddy Barlow](#)

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An infant in a frilly white gown, shrieking disapproval of the matching bonnet. Proud parents with dark sleep-deprivation circles under their eyes. A squirming older sibling, hiding behind someone's skirt. A dozen cell phones raised high to capture the jubilant moment.

And then the pastor breaks the mood: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

Few parents present their children for baptism with the intent of carrying them to the scaffold. To most eyes, the font does not bring to mind the ICU, or the aftermath of a traffic accident, or the hospice bed. And yet, Paul brings a distinctly somber note to a joyful sacrament. He reminds us that what happens in these waters is death.

In baptism, Christ offers us a share in every part of himself—even, especially, his suffering and dying. "We have been buried with him by baptism into death," Paul writes. The Greek phrase he uses implies not a distant connection but one that brings us uncomfortably close together: we have been "co-buried" with Christ, shut into the same casket, let down into the same grave. Our lacy white dresses turn into his shroud. We drown in these waters.

In George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* novels, the source of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, the people of the Iron Islands take Paul's idea to its macabre conclusion: in their ordination rite, priests hold a man under the ocean waves until he stops breathing, then (with luck) resuscitate him again on the beach. After such an initiation, Ironborn leaders are utterly fearless. Their slogan is "What's dead can never die."

Christians do not deny the reality of death. What's dead can indeed die. Our baptism does not make us impervious to pain or insulate us from future suffering. Paul's own experiences of persecution made that clear.

By the time Matthew composed his Gospel, just a few decades after Paul's letter, the Roman empire threatened most Christian communities; when Jesus sends the disciples out, he warns them that they must be prepared to take up their own crosses. "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it," he says. And so, at the font, we begin to lose our lives.

If baptism is death, however, it is the best possible kind. We are baptized not into our own one-way tickets, but into Jesus' own death, a death like no other. A death that is not the end of the story. "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." If we were co-buried, so we are also co-resurrected.

Death may come, but it no longer has dominion. Sin may come, but it will not sully us forever. Suffering may come, but we greet it like those who have already triumphed. What's dead can die. But then, like Christ, we will rise.