

“Come out”, a sermon based on John 11:1-45 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 2 April 2017.

There are people determined that the power of death will not be the ultimate power.

There are people determined that powers that entomb, incarcerate, trap and bury will not be the final power.

There are people living and working and believing and studying and praying that there is a life-giving spirit at work in our world, conquering what kills and deadens.

That even in the face of what seems dead and buried and irretrievable, a stone can be rolled back, a name can be called and the burial clothes can be unravelled. Because they see it and hear it and believe it.

Let me tell two stories, adapted from the website of the Prisoners Aid Rehabilitation Society. Let me give each of the people the name Lazarus.

“I was released after seven years in prison. I had mixed feelings about getting out of prison – at least it is secure. It’s good to be able to make my own decisions but I am really uncertain about what to do in some situations. One of my big challenges was finding a place to stay. While in prison, I had signed the house I owned for 27 years over to my partner. We separated and so I was stuck, with no place to go upon release. I have brothers and sisters, but I wanted to prove to my family that I could be independent.

A group helped me. I have never lived alone before. They found me an apartment but it was hard to get a reference because I had owned by own home for so long. And I didn’t want to go back to my old friends for one. I was trying to get away from them.

They picked me up from prison and spent most of that first day with me, helping me to renew my license, sort my tax number, and get food and the other support I would need to pay rent for the apartment. It was a huge relief to have some of that scary stuff taken care of - that's what kept me going to get started with, when times were tough!

I spent 11 weeks in the apartment, making friends with the building manager and some of my neighbours. They were a bit stand-offish to start with, but I would smile and say hello. When I started going out on the fishing boats, I would bring back fish for them and from there they warmed up!

I now live independently in the community. In five years, I want to be "a respected member of the community." To go back home and build a house on my family's land. I am working on the fishing boats. "I want to not only be a positive role model for my kids, but also save what I need to retire."

The second person.

"I joined a gang before I turned 11. I enjoyed being in a gang but it wasn't long before I got involved in violence and I was set on the path of crime.

I was in and out of prison several times, each time returning to my home turf then back to prison, triggered by familiar people and circumstances and without any support.

A while ago I left prison again, but this time it was different. My fiancé said she wouldn't marry me if I couldn't stay on the straight and narrow! I went to an organisation for help. They got me bank access and provided support.

They got me accommodation. Leaving my home turf meant I broke old habits. Every time I was tempted to return to my old ways, I would call this organisation for help. They helped me stay calm or they would come and pick me up to get me out of the environment.

I have managed to stay out of prison and my fiancé is now my wife. We have two children. I haven't entirely left the gang but I have stayed out of prison."

Lazarus is all around us, among us, and perhaps we are Lazarus.

New Zealand's imprisonment rate is 34% higher than Australia and 39% higher than the United Kingdom.

Since 1985, prisoner numbers have quadrupled.

Earlier this year it was announced that we had crossed the threshold of 10,000 people in prison.

65% of prisoners reoffend within two years.

And there is something deeply troubling in this bicultural nation of ours. 50% of the prison population is Maori and only 15% of our country's population is Maori.

At the end of the reading today, Jesus gives three instructions.

1. Take away the stone.
2. Lazarus, come out.
3. Unbind him and let him go.

The followers of Jesus have a role, to roll away the stone so Lazarus can be free of the stone tomb. The followers open up the possibility that Lazarus might come out.

Followers of Jesus – us. Take away the stone. Remove the impediment. Consider the possibility. Can this person be truly alive?

Jesus has a role. To feel with deep compassion for Lazarus, to weep with his sisters, and with determination and compassion to name Lazarus and call him out of the tomb, to trust God's capacity to raise people to life sufficient to risk calling Lazarus out.

“Lazarus, come out.”

Then the followers need to unbind Lazarus and let him go. The person might be free, but until the community unravels the constricting cloths, until a person can take up their place in the community, they do not know life in its fulness.

Most people in prison have drug or alcohol addiction issues, most have mental health issues.

And for many, these are not addressed because you have to be in prison more than two years to get on a rehabilitation programme.

Now I know, in the story Lazarus was dead and buried and in a tomb. It wasn't just a prison.

In the same way Ezekiel portrayed the bones of Israel dried up and with no hope. Yet prophesying that God would bring Israel out of its grave.

Just so at the centre of the gospel are the words of Jesus – “I am the resurrection and the life.”

There is a presence in our world, a spirit, a Christ, a God.

Who enables people to roll back stones, who calls out people from tombs, who enables them to live abundant lives in community.

Not just the tomb of imprisonment.

Cycles of domestic violence, or drug addiction, or poverty or war or hunger.

It is too a promise to us here, for you and me.

I remember the Rev. Bob Blaikie in Auckland saying that when he preached on this passage, he looked out on the congregation and thought ... can these bones live. And then he realised people were looking back on him and asking the same question.

After the congregational meeting last Wednesday night, I sense the stone has been rolled back.

And now Jesus is calling us out and inviting us to unbind the grave clothes from each other.

As we listen to the Christ who calls us out, each of us being called by our own name;

Our faith says that our world is not a closed world, our church is not a closed church, that at the centre of life is a resurrecting power, a Christ, raising people to life, abundant life.

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***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



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