

“Unbinding and Letting Go”, a sermon based on Isaiah 25:6-9 and John 11: 32-44 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 1 November 2015 by Kerry Enright.

She was devastated at her brother’s death. And it brought to the surface the gap she felt between what Jesus was doing and her experience of life, between what he promised and what she lived. She had been drawn in by who Jesus was and what he did, but now, her brother had died. What he stood for seemed empty; so came the accusation.

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

“If you had been here ...” If only we had been there to stop the car running back over her body, she would be alive today. If only we had seen the signs of depression, maybe he would be living. If only we had been there for her, more supportively instead of pushing her away, punishing her, then maybe ... If only I had been brave enough to intervene with some small things, it wouldn’t have become so big and we would not have lost him. If only I had insisted they wear life-jackets.

Few things arouse regret more than death, the final power, the final threat; it seems so final.

There were four of us, students, in a flat in the middle of Auckland, just across from the University. An old block, four floors, built in the 1930s. And we were the only students amid about 30 people, many of whom had lived there for decades. There were only two flats on each floor, so barely three metres separated our front door from our neighbour’s front door. A new neighbour moved in, and although he was reclusive we greeted each other when we met. We learned his name. It was inevitable we would, given how close we were. Then after a few months, he put a board across the stained glass panel at the top of the door. But we still greeted each other, putting out the rubbish, collecting the mail, coming and going. And then we did not see him. After a couple of days, we talked about what he might be doing. He had said he was going away. After a couple of weeks, we concluded he must have gone on holiday, but his letterbox was overflowing. There were signs it was not straightforward. We wondered what we should do, but life was full and we got on with things. Then one night, we came back from a lecture and outside our block of flats were many police cars with flashing lights, and as we came to the front of the block, the body bag was carried out, just metres away. Confronting. He had died two weeks before, metres from our front door, our nearest neighbour. So we talked and wondered and thought about who we were and what we believed and what we could have done differently.

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Over these months we as a church have experienced the power of death, to take from us people who were deeply loved and cherished.

So it was for Mary. This was no pretend death. His body had been prepared, wrapped in grave clothes and laid in the tomb, for four days, one day beyond resurrection, one day beyond hope, it seemed. The stone had been rolled across the tomb. This was death writ large, final, the end, no signs of life.

Where for us is the no possibilities place, the dead place, the tomb? Where do we experience the stone rolled across, closing us off?

Tom Long speaks of this experience as running out of time.

We pray for peace, but war rolls on. The fighting in Syria. The devastation in South Sudan. The drought in Papua New Guinea. The corruption in Vanuatu. The domestic violence in New Zealand. Melting permafrost. Species extinction. Rising seas. We are running out of time and in the meantime people die, people suffer, creation groans.

“Lord, if you had been here ...”

In Jesus the power of life conquers the power of death; not just confronts, conquers. But death does not give up without a fight. John makes the freeing of Lazarus the direct cause of the death of Jesus. The release of Lazarus so confronts the powers of death, they kill Jesus. Giving life is so threatening for death, that death battles to the end.

And that would be the end except for the light of resurrection shining upon it. The final power is not final. The last word is not the last word. What dies is the power of death over us.

Let me pause here. We have gone from feeling in our bones the power of death, to some audacious statements about the power of life. We know death because we have seen it, felt it.

How can the power of life we see in Jesus be as real as our experience of death? How can our knowing of deep life be as strong as our knowing of death? I can tell stories of death which come very close to home, death that feels final and ultimate. How can we believe in the power of life so that it feels more final, more powerful, more ultimate?

Yesterday's paper retold the story of Malala Yousafzai. Malala was shot in the head by the Taliban in 2012. A gunman identified her on a bus full of students and fired several shots, one of them striking the left side of her forehead. The doctors said she would survive but not be the same as she was. The wounding, the blood, the fear; there is no doubt about the power of death.

What is evident in her is the power of life. A voice for women's rights. "It doesn't matter what people are saying. I am following on my mission to see that every child gets a quality education." Inspired by her father despite schools being blown up and friends being killed.

The power of life.

Dorothy Day. Her biographer said of her "If anyone, in the first twenty five years of life, seemed headed for despair, it was Dorothy Day, yet she turned away from that fate and, having set her vision on eternity, she never looked back."

Dorothy Day endured an unhappy love affair, and entered upon a painful, short-lived marriage. She then settled down with her partner, with whom she had a child. Her desire to have her daughter baptised conflicted with her husband's disgust with religion, so they separated.

Yet she was one of the two American saints named by Pope Francis in his recent speech to Congress. She was perhaps "the most significant, interesting and influential person in the history of American Catholicism." She helped establish the Catholic Worker movement. She blended zeal for reforming the whole social system with practical concern for helping the individual poor. She was arrested a dozen times, the first as a suffragette in 1917, the last during a workers' demonstration in California in 1973, and took part in scores of labour and antimilitary protests."

Having set her vision on eternity. Dorothy Day believed that the death against which she worked had had its day. Death was running out of time.

I have seen that power again and again. People who knew death at its most powerful and threatening, yet believed, by their justice and perseverance, in the power of life. People in the most dire circumstances. I know many of you have had much taken from you. Yet, you have believed even more in the power of life as seen in Jesus Christ.

I have seen congregations bound, tied, entombed, with the rock rolled across the entrance. And they experienced life afresh. What bound them, bound them no more. What held them, held them no more.

Jesus calls to us, entombed, bound, tied, closed off, to receive the power of life. He calls us out, into the light, to unbind the clothes, to shake off the dust, to live. Knox Church, come out. Kerry – come out. Donald, come out. Alison – come out.

Amid all our experiences of death, so close, so troubling, so seemingly final, there is a greater power, the power of life as seen in Jesus of Nazareth, setting us free.