

Unbound and Free!

A couple of months ago there was a story in the news about two American journalists who had been arrested in North Korea for being in that country illegally. Euna Lee and Laura Ling were sentenced to 12 years of hard labor. While they were in prison, they were treated harshly. They lost a lot of weight. They were kept in small cells with no access to the outside world. They could not contact their families. Their every move and action was dictated by their captors.

Being in such a small, confined area must have been something like being in a tomb, like Lazarus was.

Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died, and he was buried in a tomb, and a large stone was put over the opening. If he had been alive, he could not have gotten out past that stone, any more than Euna and Laura could get out of their prison cells.

He, and they, were trapped, in a small, dark place, with no hope of escape, of freedom.

For Laura and Euna, it must have seemed that they would die in that place. It might have seemed like they already were dead, in a way, dead to the outside world, to their families, who could no longer see them, talk to them, hug them, be with them.

Dead and buried, in a prison tomb. They were sentenced to what amounted to a lifetime, since the hard labor and the harsh conditions would most likely have killed them before their scheduled release in 2021.

Death. That 12 year sentence was tantamount to a death sentence.

But being in a tomb or in a prison are not the only ways that we can be dead.

We can be dead in less obvious ways, living lives that are not whole, that are broken and damaged, in many ways.

Our souls, our spirits can be damaged by many things, and when that happens we are something less than alive, living something less than the abundant life that Jesus Christ came to bring us. We are something less than the people we were created to be. An important part of us is dead when our spirits are broken.

Some of us have been told we are not worthy to be loved and we have believed it.

Some of us are trapped in unfulfilling careers because we can't afford more education or for some other reason.

Some of us have suffered physical or emotional abuse.

Some of us are trapped in bodies that no longer function in the ways that allow our spirits to be fulfilled due to age, disease, the effects of stroke or dementia.

There are many ways that our spirits can be damaged that leave us feeling trapped or confined, that leave us feeling like we are in a dark place and the cell door has been locked or the tombstone has been put over the mouth of our grave.

Today we are remembering those people who have been part of our lives, people who have loved us, influenced us, made the world a better place for us. But sometimes our grief for these people who have gone before us can be overwhelming. Sometimes it seems like a part of us has died along with those we love.

Grief that is overwhelming is a hard prison guard, a heavy stone to roll away from the tomb. So are depression and loneliness. Believing the lies other people have said about you can trap you and distort your vision of your own life. Some of the other things that keep the prison door locked are selfishness and greed and not being able to forgive. These things and others can leave you less than fully alive, with deadness in your heart, mind, and soul.

When the joy and the love and the hope is gone from your life, you are not the way that God has created you to be. When you cannot laugh, cannot love, cannot dream of the future, what is the point of living? You might as well crawl in a hole and pull the stone shut behind you.

But if I am talking to you, to your situation, don't! Don't even think about it. Because I am here to tell you today that there is a way to find life again, to become whole, to roll that stone away and let the light of the world back into your life!

When Jesus got to Bethany, where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, Martha told him that Lazarus was dead and asked him why he had not come sooner. Martha believed that Jesus could have prevented his death. Later in the passage, Mary said the same thing, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus had brought a little girl back to life, but that was immediately after death. She had not been buried yet. Lazarus had been dead for four days!

In Jewish belief, that meant his spirit was gone from him.

How could he be resurrected now? He is already decomposing, as Martha points out, there is already a stench! He is bound up in his burial clothes. The stone has already been placed over the tomb. It's too late!

We might think it's too late for us as well. We have already been in the grip of hopelessness or depression or grief too long. Our habits of nurturing wrongs done to us or of believing that we cannot do what we really need to do with our lives or of seeing our lives from a negative point of view are way too engrained, way too well-established to break.

Our lives in the tombs, in the prisons, that we have made for ourselves have become comfortable. We're used to them. We don't want to come out and blink, blinded by the light of day, dumbfounded by life waiting to be lived. We don't want anything to change.

Have you ever wondered what Lazarus thought when he heard Jesus' voice telling him to come out? Maybe he heard that voice saying "Lazarus, come out!" and thought, "No! Just when I was finally starting to relax." Or maybe he thought, "Wait! I thought I was dead! What's going on?"

I can picture him raising his head, then trying to pull the cloth of his face, only to discover that his hands and feet were bound with strips of cloth, then saying, muffled by the face cloth, "I'd really like to come out, Jesus, but I'm kinda tied up at the moment."

Somehow he managed to loosen up the bindings enough to get up and come to the entrance, where Jesus saw him and told others to unbind him and let him go. Jesus didn't untie him himself, and there is no record of what Lazarus or even Mary and Martha did or said after this.

But we do know that before he called Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus was greatly disturbed and deeply moved. Death had become personal to him. Lazarus was a good friend. Outside the tomb, Jesus began to weep. He grieved, just as we do, when faced with the reality of death.

But unlike us, Jesus could do something about it.

He was not that far from facing his own death, a death he would also overcome. And so he overcame this one, knowing that death is not the end.

Whatever way we face death, whether it's physical death or the death of hope and joy in our spirits, Jesus Christ is with us, calling us to come out of our tombs, back out into the light.

In the passage from Revelation that LaNoelle read this morning, we heard that in the New Jerusalem, that is, the Kingdom of God, that God will wipe every tear from our eyes, that Death will be no more. There will be no more crying or mourning or pain.

We will all be unbound and free when we live in the presence of God. And in the story of Lazarus, Martha says that she knows her brother will be resurrected in the last days, sometime in the future.

Jesus responds to this by telling her he is the Resurrection and the Life, and then he resurrects her brother immediately. There is no waiting for the last days, for the end times. The time is NOW! Lazarus did not say no, I think I'd rather just stay here. I'm used to it already. He struggled to get up and he came out. Other people helped him, at the direction of Jesus, to be unbound and free once again.

Jesus is calling us to be unbound and free, living in his presence in the light of the world. How can we stay in darkness and captivity? Why would we stay in darkness and captivity?

The place and time for all tears and mourning and pain to be over can be NOW!! We just have to answer the voice of Jesus Christ calling to us!

When former President Clinton went to North Korea to negotiate the release of Laura and Euna, the two American journalists, they knew as soon as they saw him that they were going to be able to go home.

They suddenly saw hope and an end to their captivity. They walked away from that prison that held only death and pain and fear for them back out into the light of day, back to a future where they could live again.

When we are in the presence of Jesus Christ, we need to understand that we have hope. Death and pain and tears can no longer bind us. Our bodies will die, but our spirits will live forever, outside of the tomb, out in the light of Christ, in a world where other people follow the directions of our Lord to unbind us, acting as his hands and his voice.

Have you heard the voice? Have you heard Christ calling you to come out?

Come out! Live the abundant life you were created for!

Come out! Death no longer rules our lives!

Our spirits are unbound and free, because Christ has called to us,

Come out!!!