

Sunday, April 6, 2014: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

by [Stephanie Jaeger](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live.”

The last time I heard a sermon on this passage—about the valley of the dry bones from the book of Ezekiel—was earlier this year. It was at a special service honoring the radical legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. The Baptist preacher giving the keynote address proclaimed the renewing words of the prophet and then recounted ways in which God was trying to breathe life into struggling men and women on the South Side of Chicago. The cathedral was filled to overflowing with people of faith drawn together to work for justice and peace. They cheered as the preacher called for a living wage for workers and tighter restrictions on fracking, the controversial method of extracting oil from the ground.

But there was one point when the crowd came alive and roared amen. That was when the preacher called for changes to mandatory sentencing laws in the state of Illinois.

On any given day, more than 10,000 men are housed in Cook County Jail in Chicago. Most of them are poor; almost all are men of color. One fifth of the men suffer from mental illness.

In cell blocks, men gather in the common area. Some exercise, some watch TV, some sit idle. All are waiting. Most of them are waiting for a hearing at which bond will be set at a level they cannot afford. And so the poor stay entombed in jail, whether they are guilty or innocent, and wait until they are tried.

I think of these 10,000 men in Cook County Jail as I read the marvelous story of Jesus raising his dead friend Lazarus after three days in the tomb. Most commentaries refer to the story as the “raising of Lazarus,” emphasizing that it reveals God’s power to overcome death and renew life. God calls us out of the metaphorical tombs in which we are buried: addiction, hopelessness, guilt, depression, loss, pain. God offers us a new beginning.

But I believe that God also calls us out of the tangible tombs of entrenched poverty, poor education, and limited opportunity. So I like to title this story “The Unbinding of Lazarus.” Jesus cries to his friend in the tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus comes out of the dark cave alive again—yet still bound by strips of cloth. Lazarus is alive but not free. He is not freed until his family and friends follow Jesus’ instructions to “unbind him, and let him go.” The story of Lazarus doesn’t just reveal God’s power to renew. It also reveals our power and our calling to participate in the unbinding of our brothers and sisters.

The Greek words for bound (*deo*) and unbind (*luo*) are the same words that are used to describe the power of God—and, in my tradition, the power of the clergy: to “bind” and to “loose.” That is what we call the “power of the keys”—the power to forgive and to declare forgiveness to you for all your sins. The story of Lazarus has many gaps. We do not know how he died—if he died of an illness, from an accident or foul play, or as a consequence of some sinful act. What we do know is that the story of Lazarus links two central promises of God: life and forgiveness of sin. By unbinding Lazarus, his family and friends set him free not only from death but also from sin that simulates death.

How can we unbind our brothers and sisters from sin so that they can be free to live? We can unbind our friends and foes—and ourselves—from personal sins through forgiveness. But I believe that God is calling us to unbind more than personal sins. We are also called to unbind systemic sin—such as the poverty that suffocates generations of fellow human beings.

I live in a neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago where, outside of the sphere of influence of private institutions of higher learning and medical care, there are few economic or educational opportunities to escape entrenched urban poverty. It’s a place where race and class matter. If you are an African-American man on the South Side of Chicago, you have a better chance of going to jail than you do of going to college. This is a sin that binds all of us, whether we realize it or not. I know of no harder task than to work to unbind people who live in entrenched poverty in all of America’s cities.

And yet I believe that this too is what Jesus is calling us to do when he says “unbind him, and let him go.” When I hear that God has the power to bring Lazarus back to life, when I hear that God has the power to breathe life into skeletons in the desert, I know that God has the power to breathe life into our urban deserts. Our task is to cooperate with God and to do our part to unbind our cities and those who live in

them from the bonds of poverty.