

I Want to Break Free

"I want to break free" is the first line in Queen's famous song. There is something in these words that resonate with everyone at some stage in their life.

Is that fair to say?

I want to break free, was one of the many themes that I picked up at this year's General Assembly.

Crossreach told the story of a young man called Scott who wanted to break free.

This is Scott's story.

He was brought up in the West of Scotland, and had a reasonably good upbringing. He was always troubled emotionally and physically and was hyper-active but was never assessed or diagnosed with ADHD or anything like that. He started smoking cigarettes, cannabis and drinking alcohol when he was aged about 9 or 10 years old and as he was out of control for Mum and Dad, he ended up in the youth care system.

Eventually, he ended up homeless, living rough on the streets of Glasgow, in common closes/common landings of buildings and anywhere where he could avoid the wind and rain; he stayed in homeless hostels and sofa-surfed on couches in drug dens.

He lost all respect for himself. His Mum and Dad, his sister, his aunties and uncles blamed themselves for his behaviours. He lost all contact with them after causing them all sorts of upset and pain.

He overdosed on cocaine and heroin and he got told if he left hospital he'd die. He ignored hospital advice and left to buy more drugs. A couple of days later he overdosed again and he had the realisation that this was how he was going to die if he didn't do something and for him the question in his head was

"Do I want to live or die?"

At that point he spoke with his Care Manager and she arranged for him to get help in Rehab. He came off meth a month before he came to CrossReach – Whiteinch Move On.

At Whiteinch, he was initially a rabbit caught in the headlights in the early stages of recovery, he had no confidence and was lost and didn't know who

he was or what he wanted. The support really was immense, so helpful, if he needed to talk they were there, If he needed something they were there. Staff spent as much time with him as they could . Nothing was an issue with helping him. He started to realise he wasn't alone and he went to fellowship meetings in the community and got a Sponsor.

His confidence and self-esteem began to get better and he started to believe in himself. It's still a work in progress.

In his own words, "I turned my life around and built-up relationships with my sister, my mum and dad, my gran, my auntie just everybody gave me a second chance and I hope I'm doing them proud. They leave me keys to the house to look after the house, leave things lying around knowing I'm not going to take things.

I now have my own home and I'm in a relationship with my partner and I'm a proud dad to my 3-month-old son Lucas. It's really busy being a dad but it's an amazing feeling. I now also have a brilliant relationship with my mum and sister and her family and see them regularly.

CrossReach helps people to break free and turn their lives around. When you leave their Service they still keep in touch with you and continue to support you. I was in a very bad place abusing drugs on regular basis for number of years, I don't want to use old cliché but if I can do it anyone can do it."

Scott's story is the story on many young men and women today – not all find help. Scotland has the highest level of drug and alcohol misuse compared to the rest of the UK. Drug and alcohol-related death rates are among the highest in Europe and have doubled in the last 15 years, increasing by 17% alone in the last couple of years.

That's Scott's story – a young man caught in a trap; a young man enslaved to addiction; a young man with nowhere to turn. But a young man whose chains fell off, when he encountered the Christian message, love and care of the staff at Crossreach.

Today is the Seventh and final Sunday in Easter and today we meet with two men whose lives were turned around through their encounter with Jesus.

Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus on his way to imprison followers of The Way.

Since that encounter with Jesus, his life was never to be the same again for him. His life was turned upside down and rather than hunting down followers of Jesus, he became their greatest supporter.

But this would lead Paul into all sorts of challenging and difficult situations. Like the one we heard in our reading today.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi. There is a slave girl, a fortune teller with “a spirit of divination.” Literally meaning “the spirit of the python,” the snake that was the symbol of the prophetesses at the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The slave girl was a prophetess.

Apparently, this slave girl was good at predicting the future and brought home a lucrative profit for her owners. One of the persistent features of the New Testament is the ability of various spirits and demons to recognise Jesus, even when others (especially the Disciples) were clueless.

Here, Luke describes a demon properly identifying Paul and Silas as slaves of God. The slave girl would follow Paul and cry out, *“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”*

Eventually Paul snapped and became annoyed by her stalking him and he exorcised the spirit from her, much to the displeasure of her owners. Then things got ugly. The owners accused Paul and Silas of disturbing the peace and being Jews, a bit of Roman anti-Semitism, and the crowd rioted, and beat them within an inch of their lives.

Then they threw them in prison, in the deepest cell, and placed their feet in the stocks. So, things are not looking too good for the Apostles. And this is where it gets really interesting.

It is midnight, literally and figuratively, the darkest hour, and you might expect that Paul and Silas would be down in the dumps, but no, they are singing hymns about Jesus, so that the other prisoners can hear.

I thought about calling this sermon, *Singing in the Stocks*. Let us all make a note to ourselves that in our most difficult time, at our darkest hour, we could take a page from their book and just sing a good hymn. Pick a strong hymn reminding you who’s in charge.

I’m sure the Guild *Big Sing* at the Assembly was a great success again. I know Margaret and Irene were there and I’m sure they will share with you all that happened. I’ve seen a few video clips and there was lively singing

and clapping to *"Shine Jesus Shine"*. That's the spirit that Paul and Silas were singing with at midnight. Shine Jesus shine.

So, there they are, at midnight, in the stocks, singing their hearts out, when: "Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened."

Then the jailer realised he was in a heap of trouble and was about to fall on his sword, when Paul yelled out, "It's OK, we're still here."

The jailer called for lights and saw that they were still there, and he took them outside and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

Now to us, this sounds like a religious question, but he may have merely been asking "how do I get out of this mess?" But Paul and Silas heard it as a religious question and answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Which is what happened. And the jailer cleaned their wounds. "He brought them up into his house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God."

Now, what are we to make of this strange story?

It's a story of chains being broken.

But whose chains?

Well there is the girl possessed by a spirit. She is set free from this life and we trust that she encounters a better life. It would be interesting to know what happened for her after this. It would be lovely to think that she also came to faith.

Then there are Paul and Silas whose steel chains were literally snapped and they would have seen this as another proof of God's remarkable power in their lives.

Then there are the jailor and his household who rejoice that he has come to faith. His life has indeed been saved and he has found a new freedom in Christ.

So, in this story, we see the miraculous happening, people's lives changed through their encounter, either directly or indirectly, with the living Christ.

Luke, the author of Acts, believed in the power of Jesus and his Gospel not only to transform lives, but to make extraordinary things happen.

This week, at the Assembly, one of the standout events was the morning worship. The Moderator has an excellent gift of communication and he speaks of a deep personal faith, something rooted in his life.

He told the story of how he came to faith, and that was when he was 23. He was a disillusioned young man, he never went into the details, but we got the picture that he was in a dark place in his life and one day, he had a knock at the door and there standing in front of him, was a young man of the same age called Murdo, and Murdo, said to him, "you don't know me, but my name is Murdo and I am from the local church, would you like to come to church with me this Sunday!".

Our Moderator, Ian Greenshields said yes, and he went to the church, and he said that there was nothing spectacular about the church, hard pews, long sermons, bland hymns, but he said that at that church he was introduced to greatest person, with the greatest message, that would transform his life. Literally his chains fell off as he encountered Jesus.

As a side note to this story, Murdo, also visited another young man, that same day, and said the exact same thing to him, "Hi Murdo and I'm here to invite you to church!" and he also responded and he also met with Christ, and both the present Moderator and the other man, are serving ministers in the Church of Scotland to this day. It's a lovely story. Oh, we need the Murdos today!

When we come to faith in the living Christ, then our chains fall off and we find a new freedom and a new way to live. Of course, we will meet many challenges, life didn't get easier for Paul and Silas, they would encounter prison and beatings many more times in their lives but they knew the one who gives them life and this strength enabled them to go on.

So, this story invites us to consider our own freedom and power.

We all have our own chains.

The image of Marley in the *Christmas Carol* story comes to mind, as he comes back to warn Scrooge of the chains in life that we acquire and we carry them with us into the next.

These chains can weigh us down; can slow us up; can suck the life from us; we all know having power and money doesn't make us free, much less

happy or secure. Real personal freedom is something else. It comes from somewhere else.

Many of those people who have discovered this freedom from chains are those who have admitted their powerlessness, and turned their lives over to a "higher power." Their chains that held them and the doors that were locked behind were often of their own making. And this is what Luke's story tells us, that the power of the Risen Christ, can not only transform us, but can break our self-made chains and our locked prison doors and set us free. That's a great message for our young people today.

So, on this final Sunday of Easter, when we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, and the power of God to bring new life to us all, what are the chains that hold us? What are the doors that are closed to us? It may be time to cast them off, and open them up and exercise the freedom in which Christ has set us free!

Amen.