

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020  
St. John's from home  
EXODUS 14:19-31; PSALM 114; ROMANS 14:1-12; MATTHEW 18:21-35

*for to this end Christ died and lived again,  
so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living*

In 1971, the English composer Gavin Bryars was working on a documentary film about homelessness in London, England. There was a lot of tape that couldn't be used in the film, and Bryars discovered a short clip of one particular street-involved man, living rough, singing "Jesus' Blood Never Failed me Yet."

Bryars thought he might use this bit of tape in one of his own recordings, so he put that little bit of tape on a loop while he left his studio to get a cup of coffee. What Bryars didn't realize was that there was a full room of people nearby who would hear the loop while he stepped away. As Bryars tells it: "When I came back I found the normally lively room unnaturally subdued. People were moving about much more slowly than usual and a few were sitting alone, quietly weeping."

If you've heard the piece—even just that short loop of that man who had so much going against him, a man who was experiencing so much undue hardship, a man who had lost so much—it *is* haunting. And it's haunting, I think, because it forces us to ask a difficult question: What does it mean for a man who had so evidently lost so much, a man so obviously experiencing hardship, what does it mean for *that* man to say that Jesus had never failed him?

Because it appears that *has* happened. That Jesus *had* failed him. Was he not destitute? Was he not suffering in a way most of us can hardly imagine? Had not *almost everything* been taken away from him? Hadn't Jesus failed to keep him comfortable and well?

But then you listen, and you hear him sing with conviction: "Jesus' Blood Never Failed me Yet." And it doesn't sound like self-delusion. It sounds like the truth.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul says that "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived

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again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” Paul wanted the church in Rome to know that they all belonged to the Lord: the weak and the strong, the living and the dead. Paul wanted them to remember that Christ is crucified, and Christ is risen, and on account of this, that Jesus was their Lord. That no matter where we are in death or *life*, Jesus has taken us to be his own, and that we belong to him.

Life certainly feels a bit odd right now. I've had a few articles pass across my screen lately about the long-term effects of COVID on mental health—things like anxiety, and depression, and the kind of fatigue that seems impossible to shake—and it makes for a bit of a snapshot of what life is like for many of us at the moment.

Some of these articles speak about our fight-or-flight response—a biological mechanism that developed in our evolutionary past that helps us cope with stressful situations that are suddenly thrown upon us.

But that same fight-or-flight mechanism doesn't help us much with *long-term* stress conditions; that mechanism actually works against us in prolonged states of stress, and in the long-term it makes us more likely to get depressed, and tired, and anxious.

I can't speak to whether these articles have properly understood or explained human biological stress response, but I can sure identify with what they describe. At first, when COVID was suddenly right on top of us, demanding immediate and quick decisions about closing things down and staying home—there was a certain kind of exhilaration to it. It was hard, but many of us felt equipped and confident to make hard decisions quickly. But now, I'm feeling increasingly less well-equipped to keep up with what COVID is demanding of me. And as COVID has dragged on, and on, and on, I'm experiencing more feelings of frustration, a greater sense of powerlessness, I'm tired in a way that's hard to shake, along with a short fuse and sometimes a lack of patience with others.

And I have a feeling many of you feel similar—feeling like you're under more stress now than before, more tired now than before, less patient than

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before, and more easily frustrated. Especially as it becomes more and more clear that opening up is very different from going back to normal, that opening up is instead another stage of difficult adaptation to a frustrating situation that feels like it will never end.

And our reading from Exodus, this week at least, I'm afraid to say, offers very little help. This part of Exodus is about how God intervenes in the lives of the Israelites with great works of power, setting them free from slavery in Egypt, and parting the Red Sea. But it feels more like we are already wandering in the desert, calling out: how much longer Lord, how much longer must we suffer in this terrible situation. I still can't see my friends like I used to, I still can't see my family like I used to, I still can't shop for groceries like I used to, oh Lord would you please please please, at the very least, let me go to church like I used to?

Because I knew back then where you were, you were with me on Sunday morning, you were with me in that familiar routine. And now I'm supposed to find you at home on a computer screen, or in a building with a mask on, without even a moment to sip a cup of coffee with my friends?

How much longer oh Lord, till I can feel your presence again.

But in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul does *not* say that "Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living, but really only the living sometimes, when things are normal and comfortable."

Paul does *not* say that "Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living, but really only the living sometimes, when things are just how we'd like them to be."

What does Paul say?

Are you dead? Nope? Good. But if you were, you would belong to the Lord.

Are you alive? Yes? Good. Doesn't matter that you're weak. Doesn't matter that you're strong. If you are alive, then you also belong to the Lord.

God has already claimed you in Christ. Why? Because Christ is crucified, and Christ is risen, and on account of that, he is Lord and we belong to him.

Even the wandering Israelites weren't abandoned by their Lord, even when everyone is just plain tired of walking around in a never-ending desert. I can imagine those Israelites saying "Moses, if we pass over that hill of rocks and sand and see another hill of rocks and sand ... I'm gonna lose it."

But had God abandoned his people just because God wasn't making any great show of power? Not at all. Just like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, when they too were bewildered and thought God had abandoned them, when Jesus was *dead* to them.

But just because they felt like Jesus was dead did not mean that Jesus was dead to them. And later on they figured it out. Even in that moment where nothing was like it used to be Jesus was already walking with them.

God is with Israel not just in acts of power, but in the mundane, in the day-to-day, leading them ever onward, over one pile of rocks and sand to the next. Jesus is with his disciples on the road to Emmaus even when they couldn't see Jesus for looking straight at him.

But *we* can have that simple conviction that God *is* with us, even when the *how* is not entirely clear. And we can have that conviction because of what Paul says about the foundation of our faith. The foundation of our faith is not in our feelings, it's not in lost routines, the foundation of our faith—whether we be weak or strong, living or dead—the foundation of our faith is in what God in Christ has already accomplished for us: our faith is in Christ crucified, and Christ resurrected.

“Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

That's why that man living rough near Waterloo tube station in London in 1971—with every reason to imagine that Jesus had failed, and Jesus had abandoned him—that's why he can sing: “Jesus' blood never failed me yet.” Living rough, and having almost nothing to your name, doesn't change the fact that Christ is crucified and Christ is risen.

When you feel frustrated because things aren't turning out the way you hoped, this does not change the fact that Christ is crucified and Christ is risen. When you're feeling depressed and you don't want to get out of bed, Christ is still crucified and Christ is still risen. When you're mad, and you don't know why, Christ is still crucified and Christ is still risen. When all those demons from your past are haunting your mind in brand new ways, Christ is still crucified and Christ is still risen. When church isn't how you remember it to be: Christ is still crucified and Christ is still risen.

This is the core of our conviction, *especially* at this time: that “Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” That is, Christ died and lived again in order that he might claim *us* to be his own—no matter where we are, in death or life, in weakness or strength—and even if our *certainty* passes away, this still doesn't change what has been accomplished for us: “Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living”—claiming each of us, no matter where we are, as his very own.

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