

A confession about three nails

"Sam," the voice on the phone said, simply. I was transported back 25 years.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



Thinkstock

There's a great tradition on British radio. At 7:48 a.m., six mornings a week, a religious leader speaks live for two minutes and 45 seconds on BBC Radio 4 about an issue in the news and its theological significance. It's called "Thought for the Day," and it attracts around 6 million listeners (albeit most of whom are brushing their teeth or dropping children off at school). I fancied a go from when I first tuned in at age 12, so I was delighted to be asked five years ago; since then I've become a regular.

Not long ago I was finishing a meeting with a colleague when my phone rang. The voice said simply, "Sam"—and immediately I was transported back to my early days in ordained ministry, more than 25 years ago. He was a firefighter. He started coming to church about the time I began in the parish. He was in my first adult

confirmation class. I ushered my colleague out and sat down intently to hear what had triggered this call—rapidly processing the range of terrible events that might be about to cascade down upon me.

“I heard you on the radio this morning and thought I’d leave a message—I never expected you to pick up the phone,” said my long-lost parishioner.

“I’m so glad I did,” I said, before adding, nervously, “Is something the matter? Is your wife, daughter, son . . . ?”

“They’re fine,” he said, to my relief, and then updated me on 20 years of news since we last spoke. After a gratifying 15 minutes I interrupted and said, “Hey, this is great, but it’s mid-Tuesday morning, and I need to . . .” And I went back to being busy and important, to justify ending such a joyful interruption.

Ten minutes later the phone rang. It was him again. “I was so surprised you picked up, I forgot what I really meant to say. It’s taken me a long time to get back in touch. I have a confession to make.”

I paused. “Well,” I said, “I’m in the business. Take your time.”

He didn’t seem too daunted, for a man about to bare his soul. “Do you remember your first Easter at St. Luke’s?” What a wonderful question. It was 1992. I was overjoyed to be in the thick of parish life. There’s a lot I could say—but what did he mean? “Two weeks before Easter, at the Sunday service, you gave each one of us three nails. You said, ‘Put these somewhere where you’ll be close to them every day. And on Easter morning, bring them back with you and put them in the font and celebrate what those nails really mean.’”

I was scratching my head about the nails, but by the time he finished I was thinking, *Hmmm, I used to do that kind of thing. I’d almost forgotten. I wish I still did that kind of thing now.*

“How ’bout that,” I said. “Tell me about your confession.”

“The truth is, I never brought the nails back.”

This is the point where, if it’s a face-to-face conversation, you look over your glasses and say nothing and just make an encouraging nod to indicate you’re really listening. But on the phone you can’t do that, so I said, “Go on.”

“When I took the nails home,” he said, “I knew what I wanted to do. The next day, I took them to the fire station. I picked up my firefighter’s overalls and I sewed each one of them into its own pocket across my chest. And then I gave each one of them a name.

“The first one, the largest one, I called Faith. The second one, the rusty one, I called Courage. And the third one, the twisted, almost broken one, I called Hope. And from then on, for the next 20 years, every time the bell went and we jumped down the chute into the fire tender to go out on a job, I would put my hand on my chest. My hand would cover the pocket with the first nail, and I would say, ‘Be close to me, I need you with me.’ I would move across to the second nail and would say, ‘Give me the strength to do what I need to do today.’ And then I’d find the third, twisted, smaller nail, and I’d say, ‘Help me make it through to live another day.’

“I kept those three nails in my overalls until six years ago when I retired. And when I heard your voice on the radio, I thought it was time to tell you why I never brought them back that Easter Day.”

I was silent for about as long as you can be silent on the phone without making your companion nervous. I was in awe.

Twenty-five years ago I’d had an idea for a way to help members of a congregation get a glimpse of Christ’s passion. Turned out one of them spent the next 20 years living resurrection every day. There I was thinking I was in the thick of ministry. Turned out the Holy Spirit took the stumbling, forgetful gestures I made and, through the wonder of the paschal mystery, embodied salvation without me ever knowing it. There I was thinking going on the radio was my chance to preach the gospel to the nation. Turned out it opened the door for someone far more faithful, courageous, and hopeful to preach the gospel to me.

And what is that gospel? That Jesus donned the overalls of our flesh and, though we were hard as nails, painstakingly sewed us into his heart that we might be close to him, be safe around him, and dwell with him forever.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The three nails.”