

Leave it with me

He was moving away, the stranger said, and he wanted to leave a box in my care.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



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Some time ago I was approached by a man I'd never met before. I quickly realized he was frightened. His voice quavered, and he was reluctant to hold my gaze. He had in his hand a box, and it was clear that whatever was inside the box was very precious to him. He had a strong accent, and I struggled at first to understand what he was saying. But there was no doubt he wanted to give the box to me.

I'm always open to receiving random acts of kindness, but it was evident this wasn't a present. I said, "Let's find a place to sit down and talk." Gradually I learned why he was so scared. He came from a country where democracy was unknown and the rule of law was a joke, where being opposed to the regime was a dangerous thing to be. He had observed many ways in which the government oppressed its people, and he'd compiled a dossier which had got him into trouble. I could almost feel him

looking over his shoulder during the conversation, even in the safety of London.

But it became apparent that he intended to return to his country, in spite of the danger that almost certainly awaited him there. He had commitments, he loved his people, and he had no plan to stay in London and claim asylum, despite the considerable evidence of the jeopardy he would be in. He said, "I know where my home is, and it's not going to get any better if all the people who want a better future leave." London had been good to him and had given him a sense of well-being and welcome he hadn't known for a long time. He'd only spent a small part of his life in London, but, he said, "It's the closest I've known to feeling safe."

Eventually I asked him what was in the box. With gentle hands, entrusting something very precious to me, he handed it to me. Inside was a small animal. By this point I wouldn't have been surprised if it were alive. But it turned out to be a toy, to which he'd given his own name, because he identified with its vulnerability and tenderness. He wanted me to keep the box, and the creature inside it, so that a part of his heart could be safe in London even if the rest of him was in danger in his home country.

I said the only words he wanted me to say: "Leave it with me." I still have that box. I keep it in the safest place I know.

There are many times in life when we feel scared, troubled, or in exile, and perhaps seldom more so than in the last year. The simple claim of Christianity is that however bad things may feel now, ultimately we will be safe. When Paul writes about heaven, he speaks as though it's not so much somewhere we go as a place of which we can say, *Part of me is already there*. "You have died," he writes to the Colossians, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Think about that image. The way I see it, Christ has a flowing, wraparound mantle, and you and I are tucked into that mantle in a secret place, safe until we come fully into God's presence.

In romantic films, the two lovers—doomed to part, generally at a train station—leave each other with a keepsake. Perhaps it's a ring with entwined initials engraved inside. Maybe it's a bracelet, the circle of silver enclosing the arm like a lover's embrace surrounding the beloved. Or possibly it's a locket, hidden beneath a shirt, somewhere near the heart. The message is clear: things may be hard, we may be far apart, it may seem hard to imagine how we'll ever be together again. But you're safe with me, tucked away in a safe place. I'll never let go.

The pandemic is training in remembering that what we currently see isn't a reliable guide to what we'll see forever. COVID-19 and its consequences may seem all too real right now, but they won't last forever. The truth of our lives and the eternity of our being lie hidden with Christ in God.

And here's the paradox. Jesus is the mysterious lover, who has to depart—and on departing leaves with us a locket, a ring, a bracelet. It's the Holy Spirit, a token that means we know however bad things seem right now, our forever belongs in God. But at the same time, Jesus is the one who dwells in forever, and if we give him a keepsake—our heart, soul, mind, and strength—we can know that one day the rest of us will follow.

When I look at that little box the frightened man gave me, I think of him, of where he might be now and what danger he might be in. I wonder if he's still alive. But alive or dead, I still keep the part of him he gave me, because London was the safest place he knew. And I think of how I have a similar opportunity. I can give to Jesus something that represents the whole of me, and I can know that one day the whole of me will be there too. Because every time we pray, we stand before Jesus and hold out our fear, our faith, our doubt, and our hope, and he quietly but conclusively whispers back to us, "Leave it with me."