

The residue of Christ in the world

Jesus may be as close as a plastic bobblehead or a dried-out palm frond.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue



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“You won’t believe this: Jesus fell off my car on I-80 yesterday. It was a bad tumble at 70 miles an hour. Fatal injuries.” That’s how Pastor Josh opened a recent pastoral care meeting.

It took a moment for the rest of us to figure out he was talking about the bobblehead Jesus that some prankster had stuck on his Toyota a few months earlier. That little white plastic Jesus with red tunic, spring-loaded neck, and hands upraised as if to send the wind gliding over the car, was the perfect hood ornament.

“With Jesus on my car, I followed every rule of the road. Kept within the speed limit. Made complete stops,” Josh told me later. “He was my conscience. My compass. I always had an eye on him.”

Then it happened. Despite surviving rain, sleet, and snow, Jesus was no match for a massive gust of wind from a passing tractor trailer. One quick bounce off Josh's windshield and he vanished, crushed beneath the weight of an SUV.

I asked Josh if he missed having Jesus on his hood. "Yeah, I actually do. But part of him is still there. There's some residue I can't get off without damaging the car paint. It's glue of some kind."

His comment sent me on a mental expedition pondering all variety of residue and tracings Jesus seems to leave behind. I remember as a child, for example, the security of snuggling up to Mother when she returned to the pew after communion. The distinct smell of wine on her breath brought sweet comfort to this kindergartner. Or I think of the dried out palm branch above my friend's couch, tucked behind a framed calligraphy piece on her living room wall: "Life takes you to unexpected places; love brings you home." Her husband died on Good Friday six years ago. The palm frond came home with her from church five days before his heart attack. She's not letting go of that withered piece of greenery anytime soon. It's Christ to her—precious residue from a tough time.

Then there is Chaplain Lynn, a friend who told me of a woman named Catherine who used to visit her mother in the hospital. Catherine always insisted that Lynn bring along her scented anointing oil for each visit with Mom. This daughter would have a stack of gauze pads waiting for Lynn to soak in oil and apply to individual spots on Mother's body. It was the daughter's hope that specific healing would come to each location where the oil made contact. In preparing the stack for Lynn, Catherine would say things like, "This one's for the cancer." "This one's for the eczema." "This one's for the arthritis."

"We went through the oil!" exclaimed Lynn. The fragrance of the oil was as important to this mother-daughter team as were the prayers. When the residual fragrance of the oil wore off after a day or two, Lynn was summoned back to apply more grace.

Sometimes the left-behind tracings of Christ, the residue of his work in the world, is what keeps our faith sustained over time. How strange but true: holiness may be as close as a dab of hardened epoxy on the family car, or a moistened gauze pad resting on your arm.

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