

# The Failure of Failure

*A sermon on Matthew 28:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 April 2017*

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## Message

Jesus died an apparent failure, but in his resurrection, the failure's power over us is broken for ever.

## Sermon

So far as anybody could tell at the time, Jesus died a failure. There was no way to put a positive spin on it. Arrested, betrayed by one friend, denied by another, and deserted by all the rest. He's publicly humiliated by the military, condemned on trumped up charges, but no one will defend him, he's beaten, spat upon and abused, and Amnesty International are nowhere to be found. The crowds turn against him and cry for blood, and he's dragged out of the city and publicly executed. Whatever hopes people had put in him were all dashed. A horrible failure.

I know of another minister who tells a story about when he was a young pastor with his L plates still on and he went to a house where the husband had just died, and the newly widowed woman met him at the door and barked, "Don't you go giving me any of that preacher crap about 'he's better off now' or 'he's gone to a better place' or any of that stuff. He's gone and that's it!" And he was. She knew and she wasn't going to have it softened up by any cheap talk. He was gone and no positive spin was going to change it.

Failure. No positive spin is going to change it. It's that sinking emptiness in the pit of your stomach when you look down the list of exam results, and there's your name, at the bottom. And it's not alphabetical.

It's the surgeon returning from theatre and pulling off the surgical mask to reveal an ashen expression that speaks without having to utter a word. There's no need to ask whether the operation was a success.

It's packing up your belongings from the house and moving into separate flats; and not knowing who should take the wedding album when neither of you will look at it again because it's just too painful.

Failure. Defeat. The slide to the bottom.

What do you do with it? One response is the cheap rationalisation. It was a moral victory. Or there are more skilful rationalisations. There must be someone else to blame. It's the governments fault. It's a communist plot. It was because my potty training was dysfunctional. This has been going on since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the snake, of course, it's nothing new.

So what are we doing following Jesus? It doesn't matter how you look at it, the stories of Jesus are not success stories. The angels might sing at his birth of the King of the world who brings the good news of salvation for all, but there's precious little on the scorecard after that.

When he starts preaching, his own home town write him off as too big for his boots and when he won't shut up they try to kill him and he has to flee the town. His message is

predominantly about God and how God relates to us, but he's sneeringly dismissed as a heretic by pretty much every religious leader or teacher in the land. Not really what you'd call success.

A lot of people liked to hang around and listen to his stories, but the only people he could get to follow him were people that no one else wanted anything to do with. People who couldn't get anyone else to be their friends. Prostitutes. Pawn brokers. People who smelt of old fish all the time. Yeah, Jesus was a real social hit! And this mob he got to follow him couldn't understand him and were always fighting among themselves and trying to get Jesus to do things their way. Boy, if you can't even get your closest friends to understand what you're on about, what hope have you got?

And finally when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, and it's really crunch time, what happens? He goes head to head with the religious leaders and the Roman authorities and he loses big time. Within a week of arriving, amidst a cheering crowd who thought he was about to overthrow the Romans, clean up the temple and reign triumphant as King, he's gone. The crowds turn against him and cry for blood, playing into the hands of powerful enemies among the religious and political establishment, and he's lynched.

By mid afternoon it's all over. He's been strung up and he's dead. We can go back home now. So much for the big picture, for God's plan, for the angel's message, for the hopes of Israel. God's not going to make the finals again this year. Death remains undefeated, omnipotent. Along with taxes the one one thing that is certain and the only one you can't avoid.

Jesus hangs there as a symbol of the unavailability of failure. A symbol of all the brick walls and dead ends and unfulfilled hopes and unkept promises that humanity endures. Death laughed as his tomb was sealed with the stone.

And you can hear the widows voice at the door, "Don't come in here with any of that preacher talk." Don't mock this Friday tragedy with cheap platitudes and pious cliches. He's dead. Let's call a spade a spade. Defeat is defeat. Failure is failure. Death is death. God can pack up and go home too.

"After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb..."

And the whole story suddenly goes haywire! The stone's been rolled away, the body is gone, the angels are back. What's going on? A voice says he's risen. The Marys run from the cemetery terrified, unable to tell anyone anything that makes any sense. Emotions are all over the place. Even years later after plenty of time to get their stories together, the gospel writers still can't make enough sense of what happened to get a coherent account of it. Some say he first appeared to Mary, some to Peter. Some say he appeared in Jerusalem, some in Galilee. Some having him coming through closed doors, others having him barbecuing fish on the beach. When the whole world is turned this much on its head, everything is all over the place and you can't make much sense of it. But something has happened and nothing will ever be the same again.

On Friday, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, opening the way to the Holy of Holies. But tonight it's more than a curtain. Tonight the whole impenetrable brick wall of inevitable

failure has cracked open. And all the thousands of people who have bashed their heads hopelessly against that wall for generations, have suddenly found a breach in the wall and are coming surging through. And you and I, so drained by the horror and failure of it all as we stood round the cross on Friday, suddenly find that the story, far from being over, is only just beginning and if we will follow Jesus through that wall and into the great unknown on the other side, the brick wall of failure need never be impenetrable again.

Death, where is your sting?! Failure, where is your victory now?! Christ is risen! Everything is made new! Nothing is impossible any more! People of God, followers of Jesus, rise up and live. Trample down the gates of failure with Jesus, and live, live to the glory of God!