

We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—"dull dogma," as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama....

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe....

We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him "meek and mild" and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. To those who knew him, however, he in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; *they* objected to him as a dangerous firebrand. True, he was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers and humble before heaven.... He was emphatically not a dull man in his human lifetime, and if he was God, there can be nothing dull about God either.

—Dorothy L. Sayers

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This would be the renewal of the church—that our conscience would awaken from the sleep of death, that we would listen to Jesus, that we should be given afresh the living, present Word of God.

—Julius Schniewind

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To be a Christian means to live by the Word and the message handed down, the truth of which authenticates itself anew in life, in the realities of our own time.

—Hans von Campenhausen

I BELIEVE

The Christian's Creed

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ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD

FIRST QUESTION: WHAT IS SO UNUSUAL ABOUT THE EARTHLY JESUS?

"All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out."
—*John 6:37*

There seems to be a good deal in the Christian faith that we can accept without difficulty, even if it is our nature to be critical. For example, the gospel teaching about brotherly love goes down easily with us. We can include it neatly in the catalog of our virtues. Also, anyone who remains true to his task, as Jesus did, to the bloody and bitter end demands our respect. It provides us with a sort of prototype for uncompromising convictions, and we react sensitively when anyone insults this picture by ridicule or argument. The man on the cross is taboo even for those who otherwise chafe at the doctrinal side of Christianity.

Then there appears to be a fairly broad basis for a kind of Christian "consensus." There is only *one* point at which the heartiness and friendly head-nodding stop abruptly, namely, when the assertion is made that the corpse of this revered man came back to life and strolled out of the tomb. I put it coarsely on purpose in order to make clear that not only our reason, but also our imagination, feels the strain. When we hear the claim of a "resurrection," our inner man figuratively slams the door, and the image of the touched and touching Man suddenly seems to become a ghostly figure out of mythology, crowding out again that which for a moment began to stir us.

But we so-called Christians should subject ourselves to a little self-examination on this point, too. Of course we don't dismiss this phrase "risen from the dead" right off the bat—it belongs to

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the gold reserves of the Christian economy, so to speak, and we have grown somewhat accustomed to it through the Sunday-by-Sunday "confession of our Christian faith." It probably doesn't make any difference to us as we say it along with everyone else.

It "doesn't make any difference." This statement of the case is basically a worse and more radical rejection of belief in the resurrection than any atheistic aggressiveness could ever produce. Either Christ is risen or he *isn't*. If he is, both my life and the world will take on totally new and different aspects. If he isn't, then everything stays the same. Does that "make no difference"? If I blithely rattle off my little Christian clichés while holding to the pious faith of my fathers, I really have no idea of what is at stake in this matter of the resurrection.

Dorothy Sayers, the great English detective-story writer, once put it this way. "The people who saw the risen Christ were at least convinced that life was worth living and that death is nothing—a very different attitude from that of the modern defeatists who are so convinced that life is a misfortune, and that death, somewhat illogically, is a still greater catastrophe." How could this decision between two basic possibilities so crucial in my life leave me cold or "not make any difference"?

It's easy to understand why secular man has stopped patronizing a store where the people who stand behind the counter seem to think so little of their wares. If I as a Christian—whether in innocence or in carelessness—assure someone that I still carry around this doctrine of "risen from the dead" in a side pocket of my intellectual baggage when this phrase means absolutely nothing in my life, what good does it do? If this phrase is true, then it would have to become the "Magna Charta" of my life. It would have to *precede* even my name on my driver's license—and in capital letters! It would have to become determinative in every area of my life, working its effect in my work, in my office, in my living room, and in my bedroom. If Jesus lives and rules, then I am—for example—no longer completely without hope. My cars are driven away. Then I know that my loved ones who have passed on have not passed *away* from me but have passed *on* to

him. I do not have to take much of the disappointment in my life so terribly seriously any more. Doubtless even my car, my television set, and the hoped-for raise take on a somewhat different rank in my life's scale of values.

Who knows how many dogmas have been thus carried down through the centuries without having the least effect on our lives? This simple rote-religion of the Christian must be an abomination to God; it must be agony for him. We are like an odd and somewhat dim-witted man who is looking for a marvelous flower. Contact with it would be sure to change his life. He is convinced that this miracle-flower must be growing somewhere, but he fails to notice that he is already carrying around the seeds of this flower in his pocket (in that side pocket of his intellectual baggage). We are people who carry in our pockets all we need to fulfill our lives and to bring us to our goal. But we forget to sow it and cause it to become active. Thus it remains inert and bears no fruit.

But if that is the case, then it would be worthwhile to consider *why* the message of the Resurrection plays such a minor role for us, or even signifies no more than a shaky legend. We certainly get along much more easily with the Crucifixion. Just why is this?

Quite simply, I believe it is because we encounter our own life story in the *crucified* Jesus. We look for comfort to that brotherly one who is not a stranger to anything human and who himself has experienced what it is to be alone and forsaken, to see oneself surrounded by intrigues, to feel one's heart thrill to the enchantment of temptation, and to break out in the cold sweat of fear when death approaches. *We seek this human solidarity.* We seek someone who is like us. But a divine being who is removed from everything earthly leaves us cold. When we are nervous before an operation, disappointed in a colleague, or stuck in a financial mess, we find comfort and relief when someone tells us, "I know what you're going through. I've been in the same fix." Then they don't need to give us a "solution"; in fact, we can do without their good advice. It is enough for them to be there, listening to us, and giving us the feeling, "I stand on the same

rug as you, and I know what it is like to have that rug pulled out from under me."

Apparently that is why people flock to church on Good Friday. They want to see the image of their own misery—someone who stands with them and who knows what it is to be a man. They want to see this image in order to cope with their own lot. The crucified One doesn't have to "solve" anything. He doesn't have to "dissolve" the bonds of death; he doesn't have to "rise." It's enough for him to be nailed fast there, powerless, his head bowed, just as we let him hang.

We are far too enmeshed in much that would enslave us and drive us to despair not to be deeply suspicious of neat solutions and pat answers. The idea that someone has been able to cope with death, that something other than the long dark night awaits us, and that we will be caught up by everlasting arms—that certainly is too good to be true. Thoroughgoing suspicion is the order of the day—not only enlightened suspicion of myths and legends, but moral suspicion concerning the coward within us who is too fainthearted to stand up to life and who therefore dreams up such happy endings. Isn't it the simple truth that even the greatest lives come to an end? Even Plato and Francis of Assisi, Michelangelo and Bach are dead. There is no star in the intellectual firmament that will not set, even though posterity may still catch some reflections of its brilliance. Why should it be any different with this *one*? Or, even more, why should it be any different with us? Is he really able to pull us through the vanity of life and the nothingness of death so that we need no longer "pass away" like cattle but may "pass on" to a fulfillment that surpasses all dreams and all understanding, to a peace that never ends?

If that is true, then this certainty cannot be easy to come by. Above all, we must be suspicious of ourselves and of any cowardly tendency toward wishful thinking. We must face our doubts squarely. As a doubter, I must abandon all Christian traditions and doctrines at the very outset. I must be ready to fall into the void, supported only by one last certainty: if there is a Christ, he will not *let* me fall but will catch me up. The decision depends on him and him alone. And if I should encounter him, as doubt-

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ing Thomas encountered the risen Lord, and if I must say, "My Lord and my God," then I shall get back all the doctrine that I threw overboard in the wild venture of my doubt. I shall get them back again "incidentally," almost as a waiter gets a tip.

As I see it, there is *one* annoying problem, above all others, which I must face up to, if I want to be more than a hand-me-down Christian.

Everything connected with the Christian faith would seem to be smooth sailing if I could see Christ as a teacher of ultimate truth—someone who had valid things to say about love, about the "principle of hope," or about "death bringing life," and who knew how to demonstrate these things in his own life and death. In such a case my conscience would certainly react immediately and positively, and would be ready to place him in the pantheon of the great teachers of mankind. But that just won't do. The point of all the Gospel accounts is that something is "*told*" to me about him—what he said, did, and suffered. The account of his resurrection belongs in the same category. Thus I cannot say simply, "This speaks to me in propositions which convince me by their inner truth, as, for example, Plato convinces me when he speaks about justice or love, or Bertolt Brecht when he lashes out at middle-class morality." On the contrary, here something is really "told" about a man: that he faced the tempter and withstood his crafty diversionary tactics; that he performed mighty works that were astounding and thoroughly miraculous; and that his love included even the very men who sought his death. The news that he did not stay dead, but that God raised him, belongs to these same accounts. Obviously, everything depends on whether these quite human (and sometimes more than human) things are true and whether one can *rely* on them. If they were true it would be a shock that from then on would have the profoundest effect on the way I acted with regard to my future, to my fellowmen, and to my own death.

But isn't the real shocker the very fact that such questions about my future *depend on the credibility of historical accounts*? Under such circumstances, doesn't Goethold Lessing's thoughtful comment seem appropriate—his exclamation that only universal

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truths of reason, such as mathematical theorems, attained the ultimate degree of certainty? "Contingent historical truths," however, accounts of things by historians and reporters, could never be more than "probable." But if such accounts always contain one last factor of uncertainty (because they rest on statements by witnesses who could err, or on conclusions by historians who may fall prey to shaky sources or wrong interpretations, how can my fate for time or eternity be based on such slippery ground? How can my eternal salvation depend on historical opinions or even fads?

Why does God make it so hard for us? Wouldn't it be better if he treated us to eternal truths, moral rules, or wise sayings at which no doubt could gnaw and to which we needed say only "Yea and Amen"? Why does God make it so hard for us? Why does he overtax our desire for honesty? Our doubting is certainly neither malice nor intellectual snobbery. Indeed, we *want* the truth; it is our very honesty that drives us to skepticism.

I believe that if you think about the message and person of Jesus, one day you will hit upon the solution to this deep and disturbing question. This solution involves the very heart of the gospel, the heart that tells of Jesus Christ (and of God himself in Jesus Christ) stepping in on our side, exposing himself to the pressures of history as we are exposed, and experiencing with us hunger and thirst, desire for life and fear of death, guilt and suffering. He doesn't want to be a distant God; he wants to be as near to us as a brother, so that we can believe that he loves us and cares about us (about you and me) with an infinite passion.

So then we are not dealing here with "Great Ideas" as they have been conceived and formulated by gifted minds through the ages; we are dealing with an act of the God who declares himself to us.

On my trip to America I crossed paths with a man (he was a well-known and quite highly respected attorney) who was profoundly disturbed by the demoralization and brutalization of humanity in the worst slum areas. Plans for slum clearance were and are available *en masse*. But this man knew (and he knew it precisely because he was a Christian) that social commissions which ventured into that area of vice and misery only under

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police protection could never gain the trust of its ostracized inhabitants. Such commissions would meet rejection and would not be able to rekindle the dead spark of humanity. The slum dwellers knew that they were only a sore on the body politic as far as the social reformers were concerned, and that society would gladly be free of them. But the fact that they were also "men" did not interest the reformers at all. The latter only wanted to wipe out a center of infection (in both the moral and hygienic sense).

These slum-dwellers remained animals even when one clothed (or disguised) them in civilized garments. But the lawyer knew that the human in these dehumanized beings could be awakened only through *love*. Since they did not trust a love that climbed down from the Olympus of its middle-class world now and then to pay them a welfare visit, he rented a shabby hole in the middle of that filthy and vermin-infested area. He lived there with them and let them know that he was serious about them—he wanted to be their brother, he loved them, and he was not merely a welfare worker who saw them as a "social problem."

Then those who met him actually began to *believe* his love. They received new hope from him, hope that it could signify something to be a man. Something in them which they had long since lost track of began to breathe and awaken. Perhaps he could have directed great projects from a desk in some skyscraper. But he wanted a deeper form of satisfaction. He wanted to arouse the sparks of "hope" and "faith." He wanted to be salt that combated the decay from *within*. So he lowered himself into the depth of brotherly companionship and shared the fate of those whom he wanted to be near—authentically near. And if you had seen him, you would not have been able to distinguish him from the others, so completely did he identify with them, even outwardly.

In Jesus Christ, God has dealt similarly with us. He has come into the "depressed area" of human life seeking out not only poor Lazarus with his sores, but also the rich man in his glittering wretchedness. This is why we can believe in his love. If we rove afield into shady operations, if we succumb to the overwhelming

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force of our drives, if we are mean and jealous and full of hatred and greed, or if we sink away forsaken and stricken by fate, we need no longer tell ourselves in bitterness and cynicism, "You coward, a fine 'Image of God' you are! In this spot you'll have to do without the luxury of pious feelings, to say nothing of prayers, for there are no more gods and no more 'dear God.' You are still only a wriggling worm. You tremble with anxiety or are made miserable by boredom so that life becomes a worthless burden to you."

No, I now can know quite simply that he to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given has laid aside his divine untouchability and has plunged into the abysmal darkness that surrounds me with its terror. If I want to locate him with my eyes, I should not look up to the stratosphere (movie scenes which show someone looking ecstatically upward when he prays are patently false). No, I must seek him in the depths, in a shabby stable with the animals, in the wilderness with its thirst and its satanic temptation, in the abandonment of the cross with its god-forsakenness and its fear of death—*maybe* even in the gaiety of the wedding party at Cana, where everything was so human and turned out so well.

He is there at every point of my life, whether I laugh or cry or sit in silence. For nothing human is foreign to him, and he wants to come to me right *here* where I am now.

However, this very nearness to me means that he can be *mis-taken* for other human figures like that lawyer in the slums. Thus I can say, for example, that he is the "founder of a religion" as Muhammad was (and I can classify him in the general history of religion, thereby becoming a relativist about the whole matter).

Or I can say, "This man of antiquity made a splash for a few years in a province of the Roman Empire. What is that supposed to mean for me?" Or I can take him for a religious man, a saint, a failure, or a visionary. *All that is possible*. I can say with a certain sadness (or even snobbery), "If God wanted to be so kind as to address me personally and familiarize me with eternal things, why has he disguised himself to the point that he is unrecognizable, meeting me on the historical level as one point among many

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others on the timeline? How then can I *recognize* him among all the others and convince myself that here (*here*, of all places!) I can learn more than from Socrates or even from Mr. X and his carpenter's trade?"

Do we now understand what lies behind this question and what it is getting at? Do we understand that we are on the trail of a unique mystery? God doesn't shout eternal truths at us from heaven, an act that our inspired reason would applaud; instead, he meets us in a bit of earthly history. God thus meets us in a completely *earthly* way so that the story must be retold from generation to generation—that is the mystery of his coming! Precisely this historicity is the reverse side of a love which appears in the midst of our human existence, sharing it and throwing aside all divine prerogatives. It was not because certain propositions from the preaching of Jesus were so full of insight or so persuasive that the men of the New Testament were overwhelmed and came to a new phase of their existence, to faith. Had that been the case, then undoubtedly the intellectuals and the smart people would have had the inside track in preference to the innocent and the unpretentious. Instead, the latter experienced a great transformation in their lives because they discovered the *Lord*. Suddenly they discovered, in him who looked like them and who was "found in human form," the Savior before whom they drew back afraid and finally had to stammer, "my Lord and my God." But then the new certainty gripped them deep within. It was no mere play of waves on the surface of their intellects; it was printed firmly in their hearts.

I heard an interesting story in South Africa. A group of primitive bushmen from the backwoods were taken to a great technical exhibition showing all the wonders of our civilized world. From the viewpoint of cultural history, these men stood about on the level of stone-age man. In order to make their encounter with the modern world as dramatic as possible, they were even taken up in an airplane. Obviously, the situation was made to order for the psychologists, who fell upon the poor savages immediately in order to elicit (naturally, not by using a questionnaire!) what had made the deepest impression on them. The scientists had

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already wagered among themselves that it would certainly be the flight at thirty-five thousand feet or perhaps an electronic brain that they had seen.

But the good people gave a different and very disconcerting answer to the question about what had made the greatest impression on them. They had been most fascinated by a quite ordinary kitchen faucet. How anyone could charm valuable water out of an ordinary wall was for them *the* shattering experience. The high-altitude jet and the electronic magic with numbers were, as far as they were concerned, events in a fairyland, the mysterious region of gods and demons where anything was possible. There certainly was no need to marvel at such things! And precisely for that reason it didn't strike home to them. But the faucet! That was something out of their everyday world. They knew what thirst was. They were acquainted with the troublesome search for water and with the terror of drought. Therefore the thing that mattered to them (today we would probably say, "What mattered 'existentially' to them"), the thing that was *the* miracle, was something both familiar and foreign *to the sphere of their life*, something which had to do with their thirst, their trouble, and their hope.

Our encounter with Jesus may also take place in this way. The sphere of eternity, out of which he comes and to which his elevation returns him, may be as strange and distant to us as the jet ride was to the bushmen. But something else may strike closer to home: the fact that he is with us in the room of our life, in this room where we watch with laughter as our children come tumbling in, where we delight to read a fine letter, where we sometimes stretch out fatigued on the couch, consume our scanty or sumptuous meal, and sometimes also pace back and forth in despair. He is with us in this room of our life and has experienced this same life's fear and desire. And right here, in this room of my existence, he causes living water to spring from the wall. *That* gets to me. For he did not and does not let eternal matters float in heavenly radiance above our heads. He puts them in the middle of our life. He blesses the children (they can be so irritating and nasty with their runny noses and torn clothes). He brings the

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blessing of God to the outcasts. And heavy, frozen hearts are suddenly melted by a ray from the Eternal. Amid the struggle with hostile contemporaries, the door of his heart never slammed shut (as is usually the case); instead, the miracle of love occurred right there, and a hand of blessing could be discerned amid anxiety and pain.

Thus here, in the worldly, all too worldly pettiness of daily life, the tap of living water is opened. We are not talking about otherworldly, heavenly dew that may be detected only in pious withdrawal. This is water that I can have in the room of my earthly life. He has shown me the faucet that turns it on. In him I see that the miracle of eternity has come into my own day and has changed everything.

Now life simply teems with indications that I am loved, and that messages are being sent to me and tasks set for me. Suddenly life doesn't roll along so automatically and monotonously; it becomes the scene of an exciting interchange that keeps me constantly on my toes. Every man I meet, every affliction I must bear, indeed every joy that is not denied me, carries a letter from the heavenly Father with personal greetings or with news that comforts me or calls for thanksgiving, that contains a test or even a great gift for me to enjoy. It is a permanent interchange with God, and it suddenly revises all the questions which life poses for me.

When I reach the point where I have discovered that living water in my room, it is inevitable that I should then begin to ask whence it comes and where the eternal fountain flows. Once I pursue this question, the figure of Jesus again becomes a mystery, but in a different way. I cannot avoid the fact that he is indeed with me in my little boat or in my room, but neither can I avoid asking why wind and wave obey him and how he can command the springs of living water in my desert. Then questions arise. In all his humanity, was he really *only* human as you and I are? Did *his* shining face, too, fall into the abyss of mortality? Did death have the last word in *his* case, too? Then the question becomes acute: Does he live and rule, and is he still present? Granted, he bowed his head and died. He is my brother even there, where it is

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all over for me. But how can I dare to say, "At the time of my departing, depart not thou from me"? Can I speak like that to a dead man, or only to one who is *alive*, one who will receive me on the other side and lead me to eternal habitations?

Thus we confront the question of Easter, the miracle of the third day. Like the disciples at Emmaus, we must travel far before our hearts begin to burn within us and we are forced to ask whence this fire comes.

In this chapter, we have traversed a long road. We started with a doubt, with the problem of why God poses the decisive question of our life in historical and very human terms instead of using eternal truths. We have simply thought this doubt through to its end. Has it really been a "bitter" end, or have we come upon precisely the unique element that can free us? Didn't we suddenly find ourselves on the road to Emmaus, where the risen One drew near to us? Even doubt is an envelope in which messages from God are concealed. Therefore we should not refuse delivery of this dreaded envelope; we should open it.

Before his death, one of the greatest philosophers of our time, one of the last great idealists, was stricken by the most terrible doubt. He doubted himself, his point of view, and even that which he understood to be the Christian faith (which he did not want to abandon completely). Shortly before, he had lived through his wife's terrible death from cancer. He felt that our human individuality was also destroyed by death and that there was nothing that could be pulled through the final decay of the organism. He asked me (actually with the look of a wounded animal), "What awaits me, anyway? Does anything at all remain?" Then I spoke to him about the poor in spirit (who include even the intellectually gifted) and about the empty hands that alone can be blessed. I told him that we humans *cannot* see what awaits us and what of us endures. Our human frame may dissolve and disappear into nothingness. We are kept only by him who remembers us and leads us through that night of death which our sight can no longer pierce. We all share the life of him whom God awakened from the dead. If that is not so, then it's all over for us.

But He is *not* a dream. We shall "become like those who dream" when the flashes of glory in his human life brighten into the eternal light that shines upon us. Even now, our doubting hearts and empty hands receive the touch of blessing which awakens us to new life and grants us the certainty of new shores and a new day.

I recall how this great and honored man who saw everything slip from his grasp and who went as the "poor in spirit" to meet the Savior who awaited him in death's dark night.

SECOND QUESTION: IS THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST LEGEND OR REALITY?

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

—*Mark 16:1-8*

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named

Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

—*Luke 24:13-35*

In the previous chapter we were concerned with the basic question whether or not we can base the structure of our existence, the very meaning of our life, on historical accounts like the Gospels. We also asked if we *ought* to take such a step, and why God comes to us making such unreasonable demands. If I am to "believe in" something, then it must be absolutely certain. But it is precisely historical accounts that are laden with many elements of

uncertainty! Who will guarantee me that the witnesses are reliable and that no error has crept into the tradition? And then, when it comes to miracles (as in Jesus' resurrection from the dead), basically rational grounds require me to ask questions from the outset.

Everything we have discussed has been only an approach to the main point, which is to concern us now. Now we shall speak of the mysterious things that happened on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion.

Rudolf Alexander Schroeder tells how, when his best friend died suddenly in the prime of life, the discouraged family would huddle together with him in the evenings. Time and again the conversation would revolve around the incomprehensibility of what had happened. Then he said to himself that mere whimpering and empty palaver was not helping anyone. After all, a death was serious enough to call for meditation on essentials. And so he simply reached for the New Testament and read aloud the four Evangelists' accounts of Jesus' resurrection, one after the other (that is, virtually the same thing four times without a word of interpretation). The texts themselves spoke in their monumental simplicity. It was striking to see how a breathless silence ensued, how numbed spirits gradually began to melt and the theme of the conversation changed at once. It actually got down to the essentials as thoughts turned, calmly and collectedly, toward the last things. This turn of events appeared to Schroeder as a creative intervention, a miracle.

If a person lets the Resurrection accounts have their effect on him without getting his guard up (and, for the moment, without intellectual skepticism), at first he is bound to be struck by something in their *style* of expression. They are, in fact, an example of the Bible's use of a veiled and, one might say, discreet language in pointing to events that no words could adequately describe. Thus the way of speaking must be indirect and even cryptic. Naturally, one cannot talk about the Resurrection the way one reports a traffic accident or an historical event. A newspaper account of the Resurrection would be absurd. Everything that happens around the tomb is bathed in a mysterious, indirect light. We

hear no details of what went on; no sensationalism or miracle-mongering rips asunder the veil drawn over this mystery. We see only the reactions and effects which an event, itself invisible, produces among the disciples and the women. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the accounts differ from one another. It is natural that the subjectivity of the narrators would play a role, and that their imagination and their efforts to interpret the events would also be involved. Thus we end up with anything but four objective chronicles which may simply be summed up into one account. Involvement in the Incomprehensible is so intense that each witness speaks of it "in other tongues." Each must figuratively ransack his supply of words, concepts, and ideas in order to give utterance to the Unspeakable by every means at his disposal. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, precisely those contradictions are indicative. They seem to be "relevant," as it were.

I should like to try to elucidate my meaning by an example. In the first half of the last century there lived a physiologist named Johannes Mueller who was famous for his doctrine of "specific sensory energy." By this he meant that our sensory organs (our eyes and ears) reacted to all outward stimuli in special ways peculiar to them. For example, if someone gets punched in the nose, his ears buzz and he sees stars. In other words, he has optical and acoustical impressions even though what happened to him had nothing at all to do with optics or acoustics, with seeing or hearing. Nevertheless, that blow registered in terms of "sense impressions." Eyes and ears, seeing and hearing are, so to speak, drawn into sympathetic partnership. They are involved and they act in accordance with their peculiar characteristics, the eye through color impressions and the ear through a vibrating buzz. Our sense organs thus react to outward stimuli, but they react in completely different ways. They must figuratively convert that blow on the head, which was nonvisible and nonhearable, into their own peculiar means of reaction. Naturally the ear translates the event differently than the eye, and the difference is even greater among various individuals. One man hears humming, another hears bells; one man sees dancing stars, another sees a rainbow.

While a blow on the head may not be exactly the prettiest example to illustrate the background of the Resurrection, the main point of the analogy is still important. Those who experienced the mystery of that Resurrection morning were suddenly confronted by a reality that simply exceeded the capacities of their eyes, their ears, their reason, and even their imagination. Their normal functions were overtaxed. This wasn't the view of trees to which the eye had become accustomed, nor was it the clatter of donkey's hoofs or a girl's laughter as the ear usually registered it. This was the incursion of the totally other, of the nonhearable and nonvisible. The human perceptive faculties reacted in their usual ways: eyes and ears had their impressions, imagination conceived images of the occurrences, and reason put it all together and made connections. Thus an account of what had happened arose, although everyone's story sounded somewhat different.

Naturally, it would have been possible to reconcile these accounts with one another and to harmonize them a bit, just as some eyewitnesses settle on a completely consistent statement in order to make their testimony more credible. But that doesn't happen here; the "dancing stars" and the "rainbow" are left standing beside one another, unresolved. The witnesses certainly knew that what they wanted to report just couldn't be "re-reported" in the strict sense; it burst the usual relationships of earthly events. They could say, "Whoever takes offense at these differences has simply not yet grasped what is going on here: something incomprehensible is breaking in upon us, and our concepts begin to waver when we try to grasp it. Indeed, this event *engages* everything we are and have: our eyes, our ears, our imagination, and even our faculties for expression. We can do nothing else than speak about it. But on the other hand it is too powerful for us to be 'objective' about it. So we cannot describe the event *itself*; we can only speak about the reactions which it has evoked from us. Thus we cannot manage without the forms of statement peculiar to legends."

Now, what can we *learn* from these effects? How can we recognize the impact of the Incomprehensible from the shape of its crater?

It is not without significance that the women are the first to arrive at Jesus' tomb. The men are sunk in consuming sorrow and bitterness. They have crept into the corner like hurt animals. We know, too, why they are hurt. The so-called "Christian world view" has completely collapsed for them. On Golgotha they clapped their hands to their heads like people who had suddenly seen the light and muttered to themselves, "How could you have been so brainless as to imagine that this man was different from the rest of us, that he stood outside the framework of a normal man's biography, which admittedly and without exception ends in *death*. *How could you?*?"

Certainly it is no disgrace for a man to die. That is nothing against him; indeed, we all have to die. And it is even an honor if someone dies for an idea, as Socrates did. But if this One dies, that is a catastrophe. For of course he was not just someone who brought a new teaching, a teaching that God is love, that there are thoughts higher than ours, and that the goal of history is the Kingdom of God. If the Nazarene had only brought a "teaching" like that, his death need not have mattered. At any rate, it would not have been a catastrophe. For it would have been conceivable that this teaching of his could survive, just as the Pythagorean theorem outlived its discoverer.

But in Jesus' case things are entirely different. He obviously did not merely bring a "teaching" that God and man had been reconciled and brought into fellowship with one another. Instead, he claimed that he himself was the one who could fill the gap between God and us "with power." He (and no one else) could restore a world thrown out of joint and torn by sorrow and injustice; he could challenge the awful majesty of death.

But if that is so, then it is indeed a catastrophe when this One is himself overpowered by death or when the hands of sinful men are able to get a stranglehold on this God-begotten (or *supposedly* God-begotten) life and drag it down into the grave.

It certainly seems likely that this was why the men were swept aside and the women came alone to the tomb. But even the women do not come with the idea, say, that someone has broken through the barrier of death; it is exactly the reverse. They in-

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tend to offer a dead man their melancholy memorials. They come in the same frame of mind that motivates so many people to attend church on Good Friday: they feel, "This was a noble man. Of course, he failed, but we do not want to forget that, for a while, he brought comfort and light to our lives, and that for a short time (perhaps for an innocent childhood) he gave us the dream of a Father in heaven and a Savior in whom our life is secure."

Not one of all these people thought that he could rise from the dead. On the contrary, the only thought they had was, "Who will roll the stone away for us?" They were, in fact, seeking only the dead among the dead. Then, when they found out that he had entered a new, inconceivable life, they were so poorly prepared psychologically for this event that it was a tremendous shock for them. The text tells us again and again how a shudder, in fact, a panicky terror, overcame them. They immediately went for cover; they took flight, and their mouths seemed sealed, so that no word of what they had seen escaped them.

We know neither what happened nor how it happened. The event itself lies in an area of silence, shrouded by a veil of mystery. How (this question has already arisen) could something our categories do not cover be stated in the form of an historical account or of a newspaper report? Our mental equipment is obviously adequate only for the occurrences of our objective world. Within the human sphere, for example, it is tuned to the *historical*—the range of those things that appear and disappear but in any case end in death. But in the Resurrection accounts the understanding tries in a stammering way to testify to something that breaks through the tried and true forms of all historical processes. This "something" confuses our perceptive equipment and our faculties of expression, just as too great an earthquake can throw off a delicate seismograph so that it can no longer register precisely. We see neither the event itself nor the thing *per se*. We notice only the "before and after," the "before" where the disciples remain hopeless and depressed, and the "after" where they are gripped by a completely new faith. In a moment of absolute, objective hopelessness, in an inferno of the most terrible despair, we see arise, suddenly and without any

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psychological preparation, a new church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. This church hands on the message of that event from generation to generation like a baton, daring to tell us that we all draw our life from that *one* decisive hour.

Let him who can understand it; I can't. On the other hand, it isn't possible to escape the overpowering nature of this event by saying to oneself, "This is a myth that is told hundreds of places in the ancient world." Although men were gripped in their totality (and that includes their imagination) by this event, and although they added legendary elements, praising God not only with words, but also with images and symbolic figures, this is *not* a myth. A myth is always the result of clothing an idea (for example, the cycle of nature) in the robes of history, so that it need no longer be expressed in purely abstract form but can be recounted as "history" with an easily guessed meaning. Then children can enjoy it as an exciting tale about gods or heroes; only the mature and grown-up have the feeling that there is still more hidden in the story to give it added meaning. For this reason too, mythical figures are always gods or heroes of *antiquity* who neither can nor should be taken as historical figures.

But the news, "He is risen; he is risen indeed," was not proclaimed about a nebulous dream-figure. It was spoken about a man whom they had all known and with whom they had all spoken.

The man of antiquity could certainly participate in the cult of the resurrected Dionysius without compromising himself as a rational being. He could even cultivate deep thoughts in connection with this myth. But no rational man would dare to say, "Do you remember the man you saw day before yesterday on the Via Dolorosa, the one who looked up to the balcony of the corner house and whose mother—you know her, the woman from X Street—followed about half a block behind him, crying and leaning on the arm of Mrs. Magdalena? Well, he has come back to life!" Even in those days one couldn't be that madly reckless. And the people of Jerusalem would have repudiated this maddest of all messages just as firmly as we would, if—if they hadn't been bowled over by the upsetting facts.

But of course a new question arises immediately. *Today*, how can we arrive at this certainty (this still very odd-appearing certainty)? How can we be sure that we may deal with Jesus as a living man, that is, as someone who commands the waves of our destiny and who hears us when we speak to him, even today? Once again I recall Lessing's resigned comment, "It is one thing to have been there yourself, and another merely to hear about it." Put more pointedly, "How do we find the Easter certainty?" When it comes to the question of what our only comfort in life and in death can be, then we need to have something *different* and something *more* offered than an old story that says something completely unheard-of happened once, even if this story should be ever so well attested. Is that any reason why it should determine *my* destiny? Is that any reason for it to upset us? Why should that give *us* a new being and a new lease on life?

The first generation of Christians could have asked precisely the same question. The alleged resurrection of Jesus from the dead could never have brought the disciples to faith if they had not believed his word. For in that case there would have been plenty of other explanations handy—for example, that Jesus' body had been stolen or carried away. No one has yet been brought to faith by a miracle. At any rate, I have to confess for myself that a plain miracle story would never be enough to bow me over. A miracle can always be explained away.

Even the empty tomb did not bring the disciples to faith. (That is important!) In fact, something quite different happened. Seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel's words made the scales fall from their eyes. In the Easter light of the third day they saw at once that all Jesus' words and deeds had become like geometrical points spelling out the truth that death could not hold him.

When Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven," and the cripple really got up and went away a new, literally unburdened man—that could be said only by someone who stood on an Archimedean point, inaccessible to us, from which he could move our world. "You shall find rest for your souls in me"—that could be said only by one who lived in such peace and communion with

the Father that nothing, not even death, could rupture or interrupt it. The words, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" could be said only by someone who really understood weariness and oppression. He must have shared this weight with us as a brother would, yet his life was fed from other sources. From him flowed unfailing streams of living water.

All this suddenly dawned on the disciples in the light of that third day. A new perspective encompassed the whole life of the wandering Savior who walked this earth healing, helping, forgiving, and offering new beginnings. It was just as though the key to his secret had suddenly been pressed into their hands. They simply had not recognized him during the everyday fellowship of their life with him. To be sure, their hearts had burned within them and they had felt the shadow of a vague suspicion that something unheard-of was in the offing. But now, for the first time, it occurred to them *who* it was who had walked with them. Now, suddenly, light flashed through his enigmatic words. Heaven opened above them. He whom they had held to be one of their own (even if the greatest) now proved to be "totally other," coming from the eternity of the Father to share their life as master and friend.

This revolutionary certainty did not come to them because, for example, they believed in the resurrection (we can't "believe in the resurrection" either; one simply can't believe *in* a thing or an event). The newness came into their lives because they learned to believe in the risen One, and because his manner of self-testimony literally overpowered them. The Emmaus story shows us, with as much precision as we could wish, just how that happened.

The conversation carried on by those men as they walked along was apparently a disconsolate one. They kept coming back to the question of what could have happened to the Nazarene. The affair had only become more puzzling. They too had heard what people said had happened on Easter morning. For example, they had heard that the tomb was empty and that some people had seen a vision of angels. But it had done them as little good as such reports do for us when we hear them today. It never even oc-

curred to them to put all the reports together and to draw the conclusion, "He must be risen." Thus their confusion mounted, and their heads spun even more rapidly.

Only when the living Lord joined them, at first mysterious and unrecognized, only when he interpreted the great lines from scripture that intersect in him and point to him, only then did their hearts begin to burn. And only later did they notice the source of this burning and realize who had spoken with them.

It was not the news of the Resurrection that convinced them (for in that case they would have been just as highly skeptical as we moderns are, although in a different way). No, it was not the news of the Resurrection that convinced them; it was the figure of the risen One himself and his word that overpowered them and put them on a new track.

So it is no longer surprising that only those who had traveled with Jesus and had lived in fellowship with him became witnesses to the "Easter miracle." It was only among these that an effective connection could be made between, on the one side, what they had done and experienced with him, and, on the other, that unheard-of new thing that they experienced on Easter morning. Only among these could that effective connection be made which would ignite the sudden spark of faith, whose inconceivable testimony would leap like lightning from the living Christ, kindling generation after generation into a torch of God among the dark valleys of our earthly pilgrimage. *The resurrection is a fact that takes place only for believers.* It is a deep and very indicative element of the Easter story that, despite the empty tomb, the disciples were not permitted to "see" the Easter mystery (one could say that it was not "demonstrated" to them); they had to "believe" the word—the word—of their risen Lord.

Only because they did believe and did satisfy themselves with "Moses and the Prophets," so to speak, was the mystery of Jesus' new life revealed to them. They learned that he "was in the midst of them" when two or three gathered in his name, and that he would remain with them until the end of the world.

Therefore it is somehow sheltering and unspeakably comforting to entrust ourselves to him and, finally, holding to his hand, *our-*

selves step through that night of death which one day will engulf us all.

How much more cheering that is than believing in something as empty as a so-called immortality of the soul! In this regard I can understand the Bolsheviks and other aggrieved parties who don't hold such ideas and who find total disintegration of the organism more congenial. "There's no great Beyond, no reunion," they say. And I can understand why they announce that without a trace of sadness, but with a certain bright equanimity. For is it really pleasant never to come to an end but to have to live on and on? Whoever takes the common belief in immortality seriously will soon discover for himself that he is caught by a somewhat depressing conviction.

Once again I quote Christopher Marlowe, the sixteenth-century writer of *Dr. Faustus*, who speaks about this horror of immortality. After twenty-four years in league with the devil, Faust has a dread of immortality. He implores the mountains to fall on him, the earth to swallow him, and the universe to dissolve him away. *Pure horror is to live forever without the grace of God.*

But on Easter we are told *whose* hand it is that grips us when the night of death breaks in upon us. We are told that we need not wander alone over an empty and endless plain. The one who today offers us a new life, who makes our conscience sing, who takes upon himself our burdens, and who gives wings of confidence to our heart, *He* will receive us at last and enfold us with his presence. The faithfulness that we experience here and now can never end. And as he once came to us in the front lines of our human existence, in order to suffer our fate with us and for us, so one day we shall become partners in his glory.

He bursts through death

Through world, through sin and need.

He bursts through hell.

I am his constant fellow through it all.

The acceptable time has not yet run out. We may still venture to entrust ourselves to him in the great experiment of faith. His arms are still open to us. The master still looks for workmen.

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Perhaps God will demand my soul tonight. Who knows? Therefore everything depends on my entrusting that soul to his hands *today*. For his hands can calm the waves, rend the tomb, heal our wounds, and forgive our sins. Then the cemeteries will really become what they once were for a deep-delving mind: "God's acres," where we lie dormant, as kernels of that eternal seed which (as Klopstock once said) God has sown to ripen for the day of harvest. Then we can speak the paradoxical and superbly triumphant Easter confession of Kohlbrügge: "Therefore, when I die (but I shall no longer die) and someone finds my skull, that skull will yet preach to him like this:

I have no eyes
and yet I see him;
I have no brain nor understanding,
and yet I comprehend him;
I have no lips,
and yet I kiss him;
I have no tongue,
and yet I praise him with ye all
who call upon his name;
I am a hard skull,
and yet I melt and soften
in his love;
I lie out here in God's acre,
and yet I am in Paradise.
All suffering is forgotten.
His great love has, for our sakes,
made him bear the cross
and climb the way to Golgotha.

**THIRD QUESTION: HOW CAN I
BE SURE OF THE RISEN CHRIST?**

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in

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his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

—*John 20:24-29*

There is a small thirteenth-century miniature from Cologne that depicts the decisive encounter of Jesus with doubting Thomas.¹ Christ, followed by his disciples, steps through the church door while Thomas stands outside, ready to test Jesus by placing his hand in the nail prints. There are some significant details in this scene. Jesus stretches his arms over Thomas like a cross. It is as though the unhappy seeker already stood under the cross without realizing it. While he yet doubts, he is already touched by that gesture of Jesus' blessing. The lines in the figure of Thomas have about them a tense excitement. It seems as though Thomas is saying, "Everything depends on what happens in the next few moments. Nothing less than my identity is at stake. Am I saved, or have I fallen prey to a gigantic illusion that will leave me spiritually bankrupt?" But one final intimation of the painter is the most astounding of all. Although he stands outside in a state of unmastered doubt, Thomas is encircled by a halo, the aura of a saint. He is already enveloped by rays of glory that Jesus' other followers still lack, even though they appear secure in their discipleship.

What kind of figure is this, surrounded by doubt and hope at the same time? In a few strokes I would like to try to sketch a portrait of this man for you.

Here we are confronted by one of the New Testament stories that don't lend themselves to theology or formula. What sort of

¹It is in the Gospel-book from Great St. Martin's in Cologne, which dates from 1350. (Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels.)

theological doctrine would be distilled from this story? Could one, for instance, formulate from this story the thesis that faith requires confirmation by experience? That is, that one cannot hold something to be true unless one has established it by all means of verification (beginning with eyesight and sense of touch)? Obviously, our story resists being pressed into such a mold. Indeed, Jesus expressly rejects the idea that faith is based on proof from experience. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Perhaps one could formulate just the *opposite* thesis on the basis of Jesus' words and say that faith is not really true faith if it wants to "see" and "experience." True faith, rather, is blind. Without any reassurance, faith must take the risk of falling blindly, so to speak, at the Lord's feet. But even this thesis doesn't work, for Jesus *lets* Thomas see and feel! That may be illogical; it may be theologically "questionable"; but that's what Jesus did. So Jesus foils our attempts at theologizing.

It is a good thing to encounter a story that cannot be neatly pigeonholed. It quite definitely trains one in openness of mind, in hearing and accepting surprises. In addition (and this too is good!), a story that is so illogical and that resists all doctrinaire formulations reminds us that Holy Scripture is always greater than our minds, even greater than our theology, and that an explosive power lurks within it. No matter how industriously and cleverly we dig our intellectual canals, they cannot contain or channel the wealth of scripture; it floods over us in its surge and its fullness, drowning in its waters the old theological know-it-all called Adam.

Now let us begin by looking at the figures who appear in our text. The fact that Thomas, the doubter, comes to believe is due in no small measure to the miracle of the fellowship. We must first devote our attention to this group.

Certainly we cannot say that Thomas was a so-called "leading member" of the congregation, or even that he was a "model Christian." By current standards, he would be classified as "on the fringe" or perhaps even as an "intellectual radical." At crucial moments in the life of the fellowship, he had not exactly demon-

strated staying power. To be sure, he had not separated himself from the fellowship of the disciples, but he wasn't exactly a pillar, either. He was not a man endowed with rousing, consoling, and encouraging words.

Nevertheless, in a certain sense he *was* faithful. He was even ready to die with Jesus. In spite of that, there was a crippling hopelessness about him. Time and again he came out with things that the others hardly dared think about in their most anxious moments. "What are we fighting and preaching for?" was the burden of his questioning. "We don't know what will come of this whole venture, and yet we have invested our lives in it." "We do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"—those were his actual words as he talked aloud to himself (John 14:5).

Of course the others were just as much in the dark about whether or not they were serving a lost cause, but Thomas said openly that he didn't know. And once this is spoken, the door is open to the specter of fear. We know how it goes when people speak out in that way. Suppose you have heard a good sermon—not as good and not as authoritative as Jesus would have preached, but still a good, rousing sermon. Right afterward someone says to you (and his words fall heavy on your ear), "Granted it was a good sermon, but outside the masses pour from factory doors without having heard it. What will happen to us if the masses remain without a shepherd and if secularism stifles all searching for God? What use is one good sermon when we need a revival throughout the country? Aren't we heading for collectivism, robots, and cities like anthills? Where is Jesus going? Isn't it all fruitless in the end, and isn't the night coming, when no man can work?"

Even if we have silently thought the same thing ourselves a hundred times, something like that is paralyzing. And that was certainly Thomas' constant effect.

Finally, he absented himself *completely* from the gatherings of the disciples. He no longer put up the "opposition" but, like a wounded animal, crept into his burrow. If the disciples, the fellowship, had then said, "Thank heaven we're free of that fault-

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finding wet blanket," we would understand perfectly. But that is just what they did *not* say; they remained faithful to Thomas. They kept him posted on their experience with Jesus. And they obviously told him in such a way that he felt himself buoyed up by their brotherliness, so that he brought himself to return to their fellowship at the decisive moment.

At any rate, this fellowship is no society of the ninety-nine righteous ones, eager to get together in order to form an association for undisturbed mutual edification. They endured the uncomfortable presence of a man who could disturb them acutely and who constantly teetered on the brink of heresy. In other words, it was not a closed group or party intent on homogeneous exclusiveness, nor was it a chemically pure denomination, permitting no one to step out of line. Notice: they endured a man who doubted the *resurrection*, the basic teaching of Christianity. If he held office in any self-respecting church today, he would certainly be saddled with a heresy trial. And if the members didn't go that far, it would not usually be because they were willing to "bear with" the annoyance; it would likely be because they didn't take the church too seriously. They would tell themselves, "In the general church game a few 'extreme' or 'liberal' elements don't matter. The rest of us, after all, are pretty good plants, and we can endure the weeds until things can be sorted out on Judgment Day. Then finally—finally!—we at God's right hand can once again be by ourselves, undisturbed."

That is, of course, the reason why no revivals and no awakenings break out among us; that is why we have so few Thomas miracles. Where we have nominal members on one side and friendly tolerance on the other, no sparks are likely to fly. No one catches fire. Thomas must have noticed that it pained the disciples' fellowship not to be permitted his *complete* presence, and that it hurt them that he had excluded himself from the blessing which they shared. He bore deep wounds in his heart, but precisely for that reason he must have been moved to see that his brothers suffered pain on *his* account. In the Kingdom of God the prescription runs, "Wounds heal wounds." Which of us feels a twinge in his heart when he uses the popular phrase, "those on

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the outside," or, "the fringe members of the church"? Haven't nearly all of us classified our environment into Christian and heathen, believing and doubting, active and indifferent? But he who wants to save men's souls, concerning himself with doubters and secular mankind, must suffer pain. Otherwise he doesn't "bear with" the other person, he merely "bears" him. When he bears him, then the other *lets* himself be borne, that is, he remains neutral and is assuredly *not* on hand when Jesus' appearance behind locked doors is in the offing. I fear, however, that in such a case Jesus never comes at all. Behind the unblessed, hermetically sealed doors, people *without* Thomas go on whining for an awakening or a new power of the Spirit that will rouse the valley of dead bones. They forge "strategies," carry on "public relations," organize great conferences, and resort to all sorts of gimmicks. But nothing happens. The miracle of Pentecost fails to occur. How could it be otherwise?

Then there is Thomas himself. Thomas—we all are like him, of course, or at least *one* voice in us is. Let's see precisely *how* he doubts, for there is one way of doubting that contains a promise and another that does not.

We hear of Thomas' doubt in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:16). It happens like this: In Jerusalem there has been a growing consolidation of powers hostile to Jesus. Thomas, like everyone else, has assumed Jesus will bring in the theocracy and set up a reign of peace. Then is it possible (and this is the question of doubt) for this assumption to be correct when the force of the Messiah, instead of making headway and in fact winning, only creates a *countervorce*? And then what happens when, in a dark and depressing hour, the feeling arises that the countervorce is actually growing stronger and that one's own chances for the long-awaited "Christianization" are proportionately dimmer? What sort of dismal prophecies are these that clutch at the heart? If they prove accurate, then isn't the assumption that Jesus is victor over the world false? The introspective Thomas grapples with tormenting thoughts like these. He becomes depressed.

Then comes a last drop which brings this cup of gloom to

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overflowing: Lazarus dies. So, in other words, there is something that is stronger than Jesus, namely, death. If death can drag off the friend of Jesus as booty, that means he can seize even Jesus himself.

Perhaps this experience contributed to the fact that, later, Thomas was not able to believe the resurrection of Jesus either. Golgotha proved the case; there death carried things to a conclusion and took the friend of Lazarus too. If a man has to give in to death, then he cannot be the Savior of the world. Thus Thomas argued and calculated, and therefore he doubted.

Yet it was a *special* sort of doubt that agitated Thomas. The peculiar feature was that he didn't turn, say, to the Pharisees, or to philosophy, or to some other world view for security. All of us want something certain to hang on to. So did Thomas. But still he didn't leave; he said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." That is certainly the most disconsolate statement in the Bible. It is the speech of a man with empty hands, bereft of hope.

But if Jesus calls the poor "blessed," shouldn't that also imply a promise for those who are poor in *faith*, who are downcast and hopeless? That must have been the case with Thomas. His hopelessness did not seduce him into seeking other hopes. He was ready to die in his hopelessness and perish in faithfulness.

Now we must try to understand that the divine promise is already active in this sort of hopelessness. But first we must examine Thomas' hopelessness still more closely, for what we have said so far does not yet fathom the deepest secret of that hopelessness. Thomas didn't want just to die. He didn't want something merely negative. He wanted to bind the hopelessly lost cause of his life with the lost cause of the Nazarene. He was ready not merely to die, but to die *with* the very man in whom he had placed all his hope. If I am ready to die with another, then I surrender myself to him absolutely; I wager my entire existence on him. And that is exactly what Thomas did. Therefore, clouds of blessing floated above his hopelessness. He did not bind his fate to Jesus because he hoped that by so doing he would become rich, happy, or comparatively free, or perhaps would even be

Rose Again from the Dead

able to expect a cabinet post in the messianic kingdom. He did not give himself to Jesus in order to obtain something else.

If Thomas lived today he would certainly not give himself to Jesus in order to save the Christian West or to have some sort of counter-ideology against the East. All of those things for which he *also* might hope (the salvation of his people by the religious leader Jesus, peace among men, the propagation of a world-transforming view of love) had vanished like a dream, like a beautiful dream. Thomas certainly had had such dreams. There isn't a Christian who hasn't dreamed them at some time or other.

But Thomas was *completely* without hope. So he did not hold to Jesus in the hope of getting something. He held to him because he loved him, because he was faithful to him, and because he wanted to die with him. It was precisely his complete hopelessness that forced him to the primary, central thing, the person of the Savior himself.

I only wish that we, too, had a dose of this divine hopelessness within us, so that we didn't yet know what clouds of blessing floated above us and had no intimation of whose hands held us.

However, let us (as comrades of doubting Thomas) allow our hidden hopelessness to stand for once: the concern, for example, that *no* awakening will again sweep across our land, that secularism and indifference will continue to grow, that the trend toward a mass society will increase, that the facts will more and more disprove the lordship of Jesus, and that only a few old people will still huddle around the altars. With one brave, heroic, despairing blow, let us free ourselves from all dreams of re-Christianizing culture and even from optimistic church statistics. Let's be clear for once that we Christians may become very lonely people, and that the last old woman who still listens to us (even in this "promised land") will one day die, and that then the onetime preacher can peddle door to door. For once let's not console ourselves by saying that this is the "tribulation" that Jesus predicted. Let us rather expect the cold, chilling, furtive thoughts that will come then; let us entertain the possibility that all this could be a *refutation* of Jesus Christ and, therefore, that he had left us, as Jean Paul once expressed it, as waifs without a father,

and that he himself was a poor orphan lad. This would mean that we had been taken in by a terrible deception.

Let us not cease doubting too soon! Repressed doubts are bad; they smoulder on. And our faith should certainly not be the product of repression! Let us maintain this extreme hopelessness as Thomas did. For, as Luther said, "Testing teaches us to heed the Word." But if we doubt in that way, we won't want to run away or die or put a bullet through our head. Then our final word will be, "All right, then, I'll just die with him. Was he wrong? All right, then I will be wrong too. I'll profess his error, then; I'll not disdain him but rather fall into the abyss *with* him."

If I say that, then I have cast myself on Jesus in a way that no one who secretly lives on other hopes can do. Then I am his disciple totally and to the end. I am his disciple *only* and not a secret devotee of a Christian civilization (some sort of effective Christian counterslogan against the East, which would not really oblige me to anything). In that case my complete hopelessness (precisely *that*, of all things) has driven me to him.

Therefore, even the poor in hope are blessed. For they alone have tied their fate to Jesus, even if in despair. And Jesus does not let us down. *Our* hopes deceive everybody. Our life, you know, is full of disappointment. Our plans don't work out; we have to conquer long dry stretches in our lives; and many people whom we trust fail to keep their promises. But Jesus does not let us down.

We should serenely (or despairingly, as far as I am concerned) lay the responsibility of proof upon him. We may say to him, "Show me what you've got, and if there's nothing to you, then nothing else matters, either." And Jesus shows what he has. I am tempted to recount the story of my doubting-Thomas-nature in which this experiment with Jesus was tried, but I won't. One thing, however, is sure: the hopeless doubters have *one* decisive chance. All the props are knocked out from under them; now they are thrown on Jesus himself without knowing whether or not this foundation will hold. But in testing this last support they are dealing with Jesus alone, and that is the greatest opportunity for our faith.

Now Jesus, and he alone, has the floor, and he says, "Blessed are the poor; blessed are the poor in hope; blessed are the doubting who are willing to die with me, for with such I am willing to *live*." That may be consoling sometime, when we are at our wits' end, with all human possibilities shattered and all exits blocked. Then can come the moment when we say, "This is it. Now God is my only defense. Now I can only let myself fall into the dark like a child."

Have we understood, therefore, that Thomas' doubt is of a quite special kind? In any case, it is not to be equated with that blasé doubt that fairly bursts with self-assurance, and even less with that false snobbish doubt that wants only to argue without getting involved. Involvement is Thomas' salient characteristic. He throws himself and all he has into the balance. He is prepared to die for his doubt. He is not ready to spare his old life by avoiding Jesus' questioning eyes. His longing doubt hungers for the truth. Therefore, not only the promise, "Blessed are the poor," but also "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst" are valid for him.

We have to take a look at the background of our text; then we can understand it rightly. It is, as we have seen, the last act in the drama of doubt. It portrays the moment in which doubt reaches its climax and in which all the promises come to fulfillment.

Thomas is once again in the fellowship. He has been, so to speak, "loved into it." The disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord. He came through locked doors." Of course, this report cannot satisfy the doubter's deep honesty. That, too, is characteristic of him.

"You say he came through locked doors?" asks Thomas. And he adds to himself, "It could have been a spirit. And spirits that people think they see are usually products of their own imagination."

So this report does not satisfy Thomas. He is willing to believe only if the presence of the risen One is *real*. He is not interested in "ideas" or "spirits" which are reasonable facsimiles of the genuine article.

While Thomas is thus doubting, Jesus again comes through the locked doors, and says, "Peace be with you." He doesn't say,

"Peace be with you—except Thomas, because he has no peace—he is quarreling with me." He includes the dear doubter in his salvation of peace. And not only that—he even addresses him immediately, commanding him to place his hands in the prints of the wounds.

That is a grand and comforting thing. Jesus' attitude to this poor doubter—to *us* poor doubters—becomes clear.

We must begin by discovering that Jesus is not angry with Thomas about his questioning. Instead, Jesus lets him know that he understands. That is the last thing we can hold to when doubt comes over us: Jesus knows about us, but he does not doubt us in return. He is far from doubting *us* when we doubt *him*. (He has even taken our doubt upon himself. Didn't he go through that fearful agony when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He has borne our doubt in exactly the same way that he bore out guilt and our death.)

Next, Jesus does not wait until Thomas asks him; he is suddenly there, unasked, with his answer—and in a way that Thomas had never dreamed of. This is another illustration of Paul Gerhardt's words, "He will act in a way that will amaze you."

Finally, Jesus does not come to him with a "theory" about faith. He doesn't say something like, "Your request is not quite legitimate, theologically speaking. In reference to me, the appropriate posture is not seeing, feeling, or experience; it is blind faith."

That's the way we theologians always speak in our discussions. And that's why so few people believe us. It would certainly have been *true* if Jesus had said that. For faith is actually independent of verification by sight and touch. But in that moment, such a truth would have been an excessive demand to place on Thomas. He simply wasn't far enough along to have been able to bear that truth. Were he alive today, then there would be plenty of answers from philosophers like Kant and Jaspers; and in a twinkling a furious debate would arise, ending (as most debates do) in smoke.

Jesus, however, does something quite different. He does the completely unexpected. He lowers himself to this poor doubter.

"Seeing is really not important," Jesus may be thinking, "but Thomas is still a poor beginner, an amateur at faith. He still has no idea of what's really essential." Yet that does not hinder Jesus from yielding to this poor beginner in faith. Jesus didn't act properly, one might say. He didn't act in conformity with the prescriptions laid down in dogmatic textbooks under the heading, "Christology." He would certainly have lost points in a theological examination! Notice, please, that Thomas' request, innocent though it may be, places a *condition* on the Lord. He says, in effect, "Do thus and so, otherwise I will not believe in you." May one speak this way? No, one may not so speak; it is not proper. But Jesus does the improper. He does what the phrase of Paul's, "by faith alone," seems to contradict directly. Jesus *shows* himself to Thomas; he lets him see and touch a little. The Son of man is not only lord of the sabbath (Mark 2:28); he is also lord over dogmas, and, even more, over the methods of handling those dogmas.

The fact that Jesus became man means that he wants to bring man back from the depths of his life. Jesus' activity is always downward in its motion. Thus, in this encounter he lowers himself yet another time, going just a little bit deeper—not only to the level of the human heart, but right down to the fingertips.

This may also be instructive for us who are witnesses of Jesus. Perhaps we know someone who hasn't the slightest inkling of the correctness of orthodox belief and who therefore is so much the more depressed by uneasiness and anxiety. Should we give him a lecture about the Holy Trinity or the mysteries of predestination? Or should we do as Kierkegaard did and start out by simply "describing" to him what it is like when Jesus comes into our life: namely, that one finds something like peace; that that is a very fine thing; and that one then sees the whole world with new eyes? Of course, that could smack of emotionalism and subjective experience. Such ways of putting the matter certainly do *not* contain the ultimate mysteries of the faith, either.

But if we spoke in that way, we would show that we did not consider ourselves somehow or other above bending to such a person's poor amateurish faith. Perhaps he would understand us.

Then an occasion might arise for us to say, "You know, faith doesn't depend on subjective emotion, or on seeing and feeling. The case is, rather: Blessed are those who do not feel and yet believe." It is at the end, however, that Jesus says this, and not at the beginning. It is very like the progression from milk to solid food. We should learn a little from Jesus in this matter of how to speak to our neighbor.

And now we look on and are amazed; Thomas is conquered by faith. He exclaims, "My Lord and my God."

What, precisely, brought him to his knees? Was it really the unique opportunity he had to touch Jesus? Was it that he was permitted an experiential proof of the risen One's reality? That would be a bad break for us. *We* don't have that chance anymore, and for us Thomas can be no more than the subject of an historical incident.

Or could it possibly have been something entirely different, perhaps the fact that Jesus lowered himself as he did, that conquered him? Was he simply overpowered by the fact that someone did not scorn his poor doubt, that is, that someone stepped to his side and did not place himself and his resurrection glory *above* Thomas? Was it that he thus discovered the infinite love which sought him and followed after him? Did he see how Jesus left the faithful community of disciples standing there and sought him, him alone, although he had nothing to offer?

I'm sure that we would have no difficulty answering the question as to which of these two actions conquered Thomas. If it had been the experiential touching and seeing, then he would have come up with something like a medical diagnosis: "Yes, it all fits. The nail prints are discernible and they are genuine. He is the one. He is actually risen and alive." Thus Thomas would have had to speak of Jesus in the third person. "He" is alive; "it" fits. But that is precisely what he did *not* do; he said "you" to him. He said, "My Lord and my God."

Immediately, the matter of touching, feeling, and experiencing became inconsequential. We are never told whether Thomas acted on Jesus' offer at all, that is, whether he *really* placed his hands in the woundprints. All of that immediately fades into the

background and becomes unimportant. It either never even happened or it no longer needed to be mentioned at all.

Then does Thomas' belief really rest simply on seeing and touching Jesus? Would his heart have remained spiritually dead without the aid of his fingertips? And are we poor souls of the twentieth century lost for sure, since we obviously can no longer perform the fingertip test?

No, Thomas' belief does not rest on seeing and touching. When he says, "My Lord and my God," he is expressing infinitely more than he could have seen and felt. He says, "My Lord." Mere seeing and touching can never produce anything like that.

To cite a parallel situation, think of an historian investigating the Resurrection. Even if he should come to the scientific conclusion that the historical documentation for the resurrection of Jesus was without loopholes of any kind and beyond all doubt, would he experience anything more than a great shock or bewildered astonishment in the presence of an historical anomaly? This line of procedure would never bring him to confess, "My Lord and my God." The fact that Thomas did not simply say "it fits," but rather "my Lord" shows that he recognized the Lord by his love and not by physical characteristics, just as Mary had probably done on Easter morning.

The fact of Jesus' presenting himself to sight and touch is thus placed back in its proper perspective. It was a sort of icebreaker, a loving concession to a blocked-in faith, but it was not the cause of the faith. There is a similar clearing-up operation in our proclamation, too. It has not yet come to the point where faith is born; it merely sweeps up and prepares the cradle.

For instance, I think of Mr. X. He has met some Christians in his life who were just plain lemons and who bitterly disappointed him. How many others have been hurt by a pastor whose egotism or whose life contradicted his preaching, so that Christianity in general became untrustworthy in their eyes? Naturally, even that is not a valid objection to the faith, for faith depends on the Lord himself and not upon imperfect men. But this perfectly true comment is as much help to Mr. X as it would have been for

someone to have told Thomas (with absolute propriety) that faith was not dependent upon experience. Then, in prison, or among his colleagues, or somewhere on vacation, Mr. X meets a Christian who doesn't say much at all, but who is so thoroughly genuine that his discipleship seems to shine through. One can tell by the way he acts with simple people, by his loyalty, by his selflessness, and by other things of a moral or less definite nature. Mr. X says, "With Mr. Y one feels that his faith gives power to his life," and Mr. X is at once ready to revise his skepticism. He is also ready to listen, should this man take him along some evening to a group where a section of the Bible is studied, perhaps, or where faith and nihilism are discussed.

Let us suppose for a moment that Mr. X goes along to these meetings fairly frequently out of personal attachment for Mr. Y, and by no means out of a thirst for faith or a need for salvation. Let us suppose he tells himself, "My Christian friend may be a dreamer, but at least he is a dreamer with breadth and determination. He rings true. That illusion which he calls his 'faith' can't be too bad, even for me. It may be nonsense—O.K., then I'll go down with him." Let us suppose that he comes to take the first steps of faith in some such roundabout way, and that he touches the robe of Jesus for the very first time. Then he matures bit by bit, from that point on, because Jesus himself has now entered the picture. Who would believe that his friend would take Mr. X aside one day and tell him, "Look here, it was wrong of you to let those no-good Christians you met take your faith away from you, and it is just as wrong if you believe just because you find, or think you find, a bit of Jesus' glory mirrored in me. Blessed are they who never 'see' such men (maybe they crouch in a modern police-state prison and come in contact only with robots). Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe."

Maybe that's what happened to Thomas. Jesus' showing himself to Thomas was an icebreaker, a touching concession to an undeserving skeptic. Jesus did not want to argue with him; he wanted to take him by the hand. And then at the end of this encounter (but really at the *end*, after love and leading had done their work), then Jesus untied the water wings of support that

seeing and touching had provided. Then Thomas must swim for himself. And, as we said before, maybe Thomas never even grasped for the water wings; he may have taken the first strokes of faith boldly, as soon as he saw who was watching over his efforts to stay afloat.

It would be a fine thing if we, as Thomas' companions in misfortune, could likewise come to the point where we could say, "My Lord and my God" after having doubted so long or having spoken half-blindly about "Christendom" or the "Christian West."

It would be a fine thing if, in our moments of direst inner turmoil, we ourselves could hold fast to the one thought that, even then, Jesus understands us and keeps us from falling. Blessed are the poor in hope, for they are the ones who may say, "My Lord and my God." But if we learn to know this about him and become his disciples, may we be given the grace not to exalt ourselves above the doubting Thomases around us. We will no longer want to argue with them, but we will try to show them a little of the glory of Jesus as we understand it, perhaps even without words, letting the simple deed speak for itself. We should not worry about whether that word is letter-perfect and chemically pure in its orthodoxy. The person to whom we are speaking at the time is not going to endorse any "dogma"! He is simply invited to meet the Master and to receive his peace.

We shall never tire of asking that the Lord come to us and to the other doubters, saying in his immeasurable goodness (as he pronounced at the death of Lazarus), "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God" (John 11:4). And precisely those who are at the end and have lost all their chances shall be the bearers of the promise. They shall be showered with wonders beyond their wildest dreams. And as they stand baffled, looking for a way of escape, I have entered through a different door and already stand beside them."