The Resurrection and the Postmodern Dilemma

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In concluding this series of lectures, I want to do something rather different than what I have done in the previous two. My interest in the resurrection of Jesus is at the same time fully historical, fully theological, and fully oriented toward the mission of the church. I fail to see why I or anyone else should be browbeaten by certain forces within the academy or elsewhere into splitting up what God has joined together. For this reason, as an attempt to bring these tasks to creative fusion, I want now to look at two biblical texts and at the challenge of our present social and cultural situation. These will knock some sparks off each other and, I hope, generate some light as they do so.

The text at the middle of the picture is one of the great resurrection stories, the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). I want to lead this story with you in the light of one of the greatest among the Psalms, that combined poem which we call Psalms 42 and 43. Together these texts tell a story of enormous importance for us as we reflect on the mission of the church as the Western world lurches from modernity to postmodernity.

Let me spell out this latter context for just a moment to set the scene for considering the church's mission today. We live at the overlap of several huge cultural waves. At the social and economic level, we moved two or three hundred years ago front an agricultural economy to an industrial one, and a great many implicit values and aspirations within our culture changed drastically as a result. Many still cherish a yearning to be rooted in agriculture, and they feel frustrated as that becomes ever more impossible. But now we are also moving away very rapidly from the modern industrial economy into a world where the microchip carries more muscle and generates more money than the factory chimney. Politician and industrialists alike are caught up in the clash between the two quite different cultures. Patterns of work, economic growth, and social and cultural values are again being turned inside out in the process.

This quite sudden and threatening transition is bound up with die movement in recent years from what has been called modernism to what is being called postmodernism. To oversimplify, this has focused on three areas.

First, knowledge and truth. Where modernism thought it could know things objectively about the world, postmodernism has reminded us that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge. Everybody has a point of view, and that point of view distorts. Everybody describes things the way that suits them. There is no such thing as objective truth. Likewise, there are no such things as objective values, only preferences. I heard somebody say at a meeting in 1996, "Today, attitudes are more important than facts—and we can document that!" That statement trembles on the brink between modernity and postmodernity. The cultural symbols that encapsulate this revolution are the personal stereo and the virtual-reality screen; everyone creates their own private world.

Second, the self. Modernity vaunted the great lonely individual, the all-powerful "I," symbolised perfectly in Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* and in the proud claim, "I am the master of my fate. . . the captain of my soul."[1] But postmodernity has deconstructed the self, the "I." The "I" now may be just a floating signifier, a temporary and accidental meeting place of conflicting forces and impulses. Just as reality collapses inward upon the knower, the knower deconstructs itself.

Third, the story. Modernity implied a narrative about the way the world was. It was essentially an eschatological story. World history had been steadily moving toward, or at least eagerly awaiting, the point at which the industrial revolution and the philosophical enlightenment would burst upon the world bringing a new era of blessing for all. This huge overarching story—such overarching stories are known in this postmodernist world as metanarratives—now has been conclusively shown to be an oppressive, imperialist, and self-serving construct. It has brought untold misery to millions in the industrialized West, and to billions in the rest of the world, where cheap labor and raw materials have been ruthlessly exploited. It is a story that serves the interest of Western industrial capitalism. Modernity stands condemned of building a new tower of Babel. Postmodernity has gone on to claim, primarily with this great metanarrative as the example, that all metanarratives are suspect. They are all power games.

Collapsing reality, deconstructing selfhood, and the death of the metanarrative—these are the keys to understanding postmodernity. It is a ruthless application of the hermeneutic of suspicion to everything that the post-Enlightenment Western world has held dear. It corresponds exactly with the microchip revolution, which has generated and sustained a world m which creating new apparent realities, living in one's own private world, and telling one's own story, even though it does not cohere with anybody rise's story, becomes easier and easier. This, on one level, is what the Internet is about. We live in a cultural, economic, moral, and even religious smorgasbord. "Pick-n-mix" is the order of the day.

What does the church do when faced with this huge swirling set of cultural movements and tensions? Most of us learned our trade, learned Christianity, and learned to preach and live the gospel within the resolutely modernist and industrial world. Some branches of Christianity, it is true, have managed to hold onto a premodern way of thinking and even of living, holding the modern world, let alone the postmodern world, at arm's length. But most of us traditionally have articulated the gospel to people who thought and felt as modern people, particularly as "progress" people—people who thought that if they worked a little harder and pulled their weight a bit more strongly, everything would pan out. That modernist dream, translated into theology, sustains a sort of Pelagianism: pull yourself up by your moral bootstraps, save yourself by your own efforts. And since that was what Martin Luther attacked with his doctrine of justification by faith, we have preached a message, of grace and faith to a world of eager Pelagians. We have announced a pure spiritual message, uncorrupted by political and social reflection.

That looks fine to begin with. If you meet a Pelagian coming down the street, give him Augustine or Luther. But there are two problems with this procedure. First, of course, it is not what Saint Paul himself meant by justification by faith, but that is another subject for another day. Second, with the move to postmodernity, most of our contemporaries already, and all of them soon, will not be Pelagians any longer. Those who have abandoned the smokestack economy for the microchip, those who have denied

all objective knowledge in favor of a world of feelings and impulses, those who have abandoned the arrogant Enlightenment "I" for the deconstructed mass of signifiers, those who have torn down the great metanarrative and now play with different interchangeable stories as they come along—those who live in this world, which is increasingly our world, are not trying to pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps. Where would they pull themselves up to? Why would they bother? Who are "they," anyway? Goal, motive, identity—all of these have been undermined by the shifting sands of postmodernity.

Faced with this situation, many have tried—some are still trying—to deny the presence of postmodernity, to retain the modern world in which we felt so comfortable and in which (whether we realize it or not) we preached a modernist gospel. Many want to turn the clock back, culturally and theologically.

It cannot be done.

My proposal to you is that we should not be frightened of the postmodern critique. It had to come. It is, I believe, a necessary judgment on the arrogance of modernity, and it is essentially a judgment from within. Our task is to reflect on this moment of despair within our culture and, reflecting biblically and Christianly, to see our way through the moment of despair and out the other side. That is why I want to talk to you about the resurrection and about the Emmaus Road story; that is why I want to do so through the lens of the poem that we call Psalms 42 and 43, which (despite its customary division in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Bibles) is actually a single poem, with its refrain:

> Why are you cast down, O my soul,
>
> and why are you disquieted within me?
>
> Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
>
> my help and my God. (42:11)

This psalm contains a magnificent prayer, which we do well to echo as we consider our own calling:

> O send out your light and your truth;
>
> let them lead me;
>
> let them bring me to your holy hill.
>
> and to your dwelling.
>
> Then I will go to the altar of God,
>
> to God my exceeding joy;
>
> and I will praise you with the harp,

O God, my God. (43:3-4)

Let me take you quickly through this poem, so that we see its shape and its thrust. The whole is about being in the presence of God. At its moat obvious level, it is about someone who has experienced the presence of God in the Temple in Jerusalem. The poet remembers the excitement of being close to God and feels a deep ache and a sense of loss because he is not there any more.

So, in verses 1 to 5, he is in a state of what we might call depression. He is thirsty for God, like a deer in the desert longing for cool water. He finds himself in tears twenty-four hours a day. His memories of happier times only make him feel worse. All he can do is engage in an inner dialogue: Why are you so heavy? Hope in God—I shall again worship him.

Then, in 42:6-11, he remembers what it was actually like, being in the presence of God. He is a long way away from Jerusalem, in the land of Jordan or up on Mount Herman. He knows that in theory YHWH is there with him, even in exile, and he can pray to YHWH, but still the poet feels as if he is a very long way off, that his enemies oppress him and people taunt him, "Where is your God?" There is no evidence of the presence of YHWH. So the poet longs to be back in Jerusalem, where one could sense God's presence and grace where everyone was caught up with worship and adorations again the poet reminds himself that he must hope. (Telling yourself to hope is not, incidentally, the same as hoping; but if it is all you can manage, it is a good deal better than nothing.)

Then, in what we call Psalm 43, but which is actually the third and last stanza of the same poem, the problem comes more into focus. The psalmist is not just geographically distant from the home of God, he is surrounded by people whose whole way of life is radically opposed to God. They are ungodly, deceitful, and unjust. He is powerless before them, and God seems to have abandoned him. It is at this point, the low point in the whole poem, that he prays:

O send out your light and your truth;

let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy hill

and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God,

to God my exceeding joy;

and I will praise you with the harp,

O God, my God. (43:3-4)

He is far away from Jerusalem and needs to be led back with joy, like Israel in the wilderness being led by the pillar of cloud and fire, the strange symbolic presence the

living God. "Light and truth" are what you need, not just when your intellect is curious and needs stimulating, but when your whole being is lost, downcast, depressed, and thirsty for God. Then he returns once again to the refrain:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,

and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my help and my God. (43 -5)

I want you now to hold this poem in your minds as we turn to the New Testament. We will use the language and imagery the poem supplies as the visual backdrop, or perhaps the musical accompaniment, to the story we are now going to examine, the story of the two disciples, on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35.

I should like first to consider the background to the events that Luke describes here. It is the afternoon of the first Easter Day. All sorts of strange things have happened in the morning—rumors of visions and of an empty tomb-and the disciples still have not a clue as to what is really going on. As the day wears on, two of them set off to go home to Emmaus. They are joined by a mysterious stranger, who engages them in conversation about the new events. If we are to understand this section historically, it is vital that we grasp the central point stated in verse 21. "We had hoped," they say, "that he was the one to redeem Israel."

Where were they coming from? What was their problem?

They had been living out of a story, a controlling narrative, a "metanarrative," as we might say. This story was built up from historical precedents, prophetic promises and of course from the songs of the Psalter. The Exodus was the backdrop. God's subsequent liberations of his people from various foreign power, formed successive native layers all pointing in the same direction. When pagan oppression was at its height, Israel's God would step in and deliver her once more.

Why are you cast down, O my soul

and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

In particular—and this is perhaps the most important point to grasp—most first-century Jews believed that the Exile was not yet really over. Yes, they had come back from Babylon, geographically. But the pagans were still on top: first Persia, then Greece, then Syria, and now Rome. No sensitive or intelligent Jew would have dreamed of asserting that the promises of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the rest had been fulfilled in the various paltry "returns" that had taken place. Israel still needed "redeeming"—which, in their language, was an obvious code for the Exodus. The Exodus was the great covenant moment; what they now needed was covenant renewal. So we may imagine that when they prayed Psalm 43, they had this situation in view and some very clear notions as to

what they were hoping for: *Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me? . . . O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; . . . Why are you cast down, O my soul . . . Hope in God!*

The Hebrew Scriptures thus offered to Jesus and his contemporaries a story in search of an ending. Jesus' followers had thought that the ending was going to happen with Jesus. And clearly, it had not.

How had they thought it would happen? The pattern of messianic and prophetic movements in the centuries either side or Jesus gives a fairly clear and consistent picture. The method and the means would be quite simple: holiness, zeal for God and the Law, and military revolt. The holy remnant, with God on its side would defeat the pagan hordes. Thus it had always been in scripture, and thus, they believed, it would be when the great climax came, when Israel's God would become King of all the world. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." The two on the road to Emmaus had been doing what the psalm told them to do: *Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

The crucifixion of Jesus was therefore the complete and final devastation of their hope. Crucifixion is what happens to people who think they are going to liberate Israel and find out, too late, that they are mistaken. It is not simply that Jesus' followers knew from Deuteronomy that a crucified person was under God's curse. Nor was it simply that they had not yet worked out a theology of Jesus' atoning death. The crucifixion already had, for them, a perfectly clear theological as well as political meaning: *It meant that the exile was still continuing, that God had not forgiven Israel's sins, and that pagans were still ruling the world.* Their thirst for redemption for God's light and truth to come and lead them had still not been satisfied. All of this we must, as historians, hold in our minds if we wish to understand the story of the road to Emmaus at its most basic level.

This explains, of course, why the two disciples were arguing so vigorously. They had been traveling up a road that they thought was leading to freedom, and it turned out to be a cul-de-sac. As they explained to the mysterious stranger, all the signs were right. Jesus of Nazareth had indeed been a prophet mighty in word and deed, God had been with him, and the people had approved him (24:19). Surely he was the one through whom the story would reach its climax, and Israel would be free! How could they possibly have been so mistaken—as his execution by their leaders and rulers showed they had been (24:20)? And now the confusion has become worse, confounded because of strange reports about a missing body and a vision of angels (24:22-24). This has nothing to do with what they have been hoping for. It is merely a disturbing extra puzzle on top of the deep sorrow and disappointment they are feeling (24:17). The two disciples in this story are *not* feeling guilty about having run away, as people so often say in the describing Easter. They are feeling sad, let down, and possibly even angry. *I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me"* (Psalm 42:9)?

The response from the stranger is to *tell the story*—differently—and to show that within the historical precedents, the prophetic promises, and the psalmists' prayers there lay a constant theme and pattern to which they had hitherto been blind. Israel's sufferings increased in Egypt to the screaming point, and *then* the redemption occurred. Israel cried

to the Lord in her suffering, and *then* he raised up judges to deliver here. The Assyrians swept through the country and surrounded Jerusalem; *then* they were routed by YHWH himself when they were on the point of taking the city. When Israel is *cast down*, walking about *mournfully* because of *the oppression of the enemy*, then her God will act, sending out his light and truth to lead her like the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness. And though Babylon had succeeded where Assyria failed, to be followed by the other pagan nations climaxing now with Rome, the prophets pointed into the gloom and declared that it would be *through* this darkness that the redemption would be narrowed down to a point, a remnant, a Servant, one like a Son of Man attacked by monsters; and this little group would pass through the raging waters and not drown, thrown the fire and not be harmed. Somehow, strangely, the saving purposes of YHWH for Israel—and through Israel for the world—would carry Israel and the world through the most intense suffering to emerge on the other side as exile was at last undone, as sins were at last forgiven as an act in history, as the covenant was renewed, and as the kingdom of God was finally established.

This, then, was after all how the story worked; this was the narrative the prophets had been elaborating. Yes, the scriptures were indeed to be read as a narrative reaching its climax. They never were a mere collection of arbitrary or atomized proof texts. But no, the story was never about Israel beating up her enemies and becoming established as the high-and-mighty master of the world. It was *always* the story of how the creator God, Israel's covenant God, would bring his saving purposes for the world to birth through the suffering and vindication of Israel. "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." (24:27). This could never be a matter of soiled "messianic" proof-texts alone. It was the entire narrative, the complete storyline, the whole world of prayer and hope, focused on Israel as the bearer of God's promises for the world, then focused on the remnant as the bearer of Israel's destiny, and finally focused on Israel's true king as the one upon whom the task even of the remnant would eventually devolve. He was the one who had been the servant for the servant-people. He was the one who had done for Israel and the world what Israel and the world could not do for themselves.

Their slowness of heart and lack of belief in the prophets had not therefore, been a purely spiritual blindness. It had been, a matter of telling, and living, the wrong story—or, at least the right story in the wrong way. But now, suddenly, with the right story in their head and Hearts, a new possibility—huge, astonishing, and breathtaking—started to emerge before them. Suppose the reason the key would not fit the lock was that they were trying the wrong door? Suppose Jesus' execution was not the clear disproof of his messianic vocation but its confirmation and climax? Suppose the cross was not one more example of the triumph of paganism over God's people but was actually God's means of defeating evil once and for all? Suppose this was, after all, how the exile was designed to end, how sins were to be forgiven and how the kingdom was to come? Suppose this was what God's light and truth looked like, coming unexpectedly to lead his people back into his presence?

As this strange realization began to creep over them, they arrived at their house and invited the stranger to stay with them. He quietly assumed the role of host, taking, blessing, and breaking the bread. They recognized him, and he vanished. And with that recognition the story of the last hour itself suddenly made sense. "Were not our hearts burning within us when he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us" (24:32). And their testimony to each other turns into eager testimony to

the others as they hurry back to Jerusalem, where their own news is met with answering news from the eleven: The Lord has indeed risen—he has appeared to Simon (24:34)! Then they told what had taken place on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread (24:35).

Notice what has happened. Their prayer has been answered. Their longing has been satisfied. They have returned to God's *holy hill, and to his dwelling*. God's *light and truth* have led them back, and their sorrow has been turned into *praise*.

Already, of course, we are not just telling the bare facts of what happened. There are, after all, no such things as bare facts, least of all in a story like this. But we have been focusing on the disciples themselves. Lee us shift the focus for a few moments, and look at what Luke is doing with this story.

The first thing to point out is Luke's stress on the surprise fulfillment of scripture in the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the key moments in each section of the chapter—verses 7, 26-27, and 44-49—he underlines the fact that the story he has been telling makes sense, and only makes sense, as the great climax of the story told by Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, that is, the story of how the creator God is saving the world through his people Israel, with that action now visibly focused on Jesus, the Messiah.

Let us consider in a little more detail just one of these features. The way in which Luke has told central story of this chapter invites us to compare and contrast it with Genesis 3. Genesis 3 begins with the man and the woman in the garden, starting the task set before them of being God's image-bearers in his newly created world, that is, of bringing God's love and care and wise ordering to bear upon the whole creation. The woman takes the forbidden fruit and gives it to the man, and they both eat it. "The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked"(3:7). And they begin, in sorrow and shame, to argue about responsibility and to go out into a puzzling world of thorns and thistles.

Luke wants to tell us that this story has now been reversed. I take it that the couple on the road were husband and wife, Cleopas and Mary (cf. John 19:25). The thorns and thistles and turnip of their world have been puzzling enough, and now they stand in sorrow and shame with their hopes in tatters. Following Jesus' astonishing exposition of scripture, they come into the house; Jesus takes the bread blesses it, and breaks it, "and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (the Greek is very close to the Septuagint of Genesis 3:7). They thereby become part of the vanguard for Gods project of restoring the world, in which his image-bearers take his forgiving love and his wise ordering—that is, his kingdom—to the whole of creation. Earle Ellis in his commentary on Luke points out that the meal in Emmaus is the eighth meal scene in the gospel, where the Last Supper was the seventh: the week of the first creation is over, and Easter is the beginning of the new creation.[2] God's new world order has arrived. The exile is over: not just Israel's exile in actual and spiritual Babylon, but the exile of the human race, shut out of the garden. The new world order does not look like people thought it would, but they must get used to the fact that it is here and that they are not only its beneficiaries, but also its ambassadors and and witnesses.

Within this new world, there is a new awareness of who Jesus is. Consider how Luke has used this story to balance the story he told way back at the beginning of his

gospel about another husband and wife, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus: the boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52). The whole village had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover. When the feast was done, Jesus parents set off for home with all the family and friends. Then, after a full day's journey, they realized that Jesus was not with them. Panic! They rushed back to Jerusalem and spent three days looking for him. Eventually they found him—in the Temple. "Did you not know," he said, "that I must be about my Father's business?" (2:49). And they did not understand what he meant.

Now do you see what Luke has done? Here is the later Passover. Here are the two going away from Jerusalem. They have waited for three days in agony of spirit, and now they are leaving the city. This time Jesus is with them but incognito. "Was it not necessary," he says, "that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (24:26) And now their eyes are opened, they *do* know him, and they rush back to Jerusalem full of joy.

In framing his gospel narrative m this way, Luke has given us a historical version of Psalms 42 and 43. Here, in Luke 2, are Mary and Joseph on the road, thirsty for God and not finding him, living with sorrow and tears away from Jerusalem. Here is another couple in Luke 24, also sorrowful; and here is the light and truth of God in the person of Jesus, the exposition of scripture, and the breaking of bread; and they are led back to Jerusalem, back to God's city, back to the place of hope and promise. The last line of Luke's gospel picks up the fourth verse of Psalm 42 and 43. They worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the Temple, praising God. Somewhere along the road, literally and metaphorically, Gods light and truth had come to lead them, to lead them into his very presence, to the place where despair gives way to joy, and mourning to dancing.

And how has this come about? It has happened because the Messiah himself has gone to the place of pain, the place where Israel and indeed the whole world was in deep distress. He has been cast down and oppressed by the enemy. In Gethsemane he echoed the grief of Psalm 42:9, praying in anguish (22:44). On the cross, he acted out Psalm 42:9, "I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'" Jesus as Messiah became the suffering Israel on behalf of the sufering Israel; he went into exile—Israel's exile, the human exile from the garden, the exile of the whole cosmos—to redeem those who were in exile. And in so doing, he became on the cross on Good Friday and in the resurrection on Easter morning, the very embodiment of Psalm 43:3. This is what God's light and truth look like when at last, in response to a thousand years of prayer, they come forth from God's presence to lead God's people to his holy hill and to his dwelling back from the place of tears to the place of Joy. Where are God's light and truth in this story? Are they not there, incognito, on the road, leading the disciples to understand the scriptures, and strangely known in the breaking of the bread? And does that not lead us to say also that God's light and truth were there like the pillar of cloud and fire on the previous afternoon m the wilderness of Calvary, outside the city walk, outside the garden, away from the place of hope rather than the place of tears, the place where God seems to be forgotten and God seems to have forgotten his people?

I wish to make one last point about the way in which Luke has told the story. It concerns the central symbol, carefully repeated, that lies at the heart of the Emmaus narrative. *Jesus is recognized when he takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it* (24:30). Yes, Luke says a few verses later, summing up the entire excited announcement of the two disciples: "they told what had happened on the road"—which we already know

means the full-dress exposition of scripture, the telling of God's story—"and how he had been made known to them *in the breaking of the bread*" (24:35). Now, unless we are extremely dense, we can hardly miss what Luke is saying. The last time he had broken the bread was, of course at the Last Supper (22:19). And the first Lucan summary of the whole life of the church is found in Acts 2:42, in these words: "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The only reason for "breaking of bread" in such a list is if that "breaking" earned particular significance. Luke's first audience would have heard him bring together the exposition of scripture and the breaking of bread, the word and the sacrament, the story and the symbol, as the central, normative, daily marks (Acts 2:46) of the church's life. The heart is warmed, says Luke, when scripture is expounded so as to bring out the true story—and the Lord is known in the breaking of the bread. The two belong together, interpreting each other and together pointing to the new world, the new vocation, the kingdom of God, and above all to Jesus himself as the climax of Israel's history and now Lord of the world.

So in terms of Luke's reading of the whole Old Testament scriptures, we discover at last now we might reread Psalms 42 and 43 within a Christian setting. The Temple, the place where God has promised to dwell with his people is quietly but decisively replaced by Jesus himself. And the Temple worship is replaced by the breaking of bread in Jesus' name. *Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you so disquieted within me? Hope in God*—in the Word made flesh, in the God who wept in Gethsemane and who became God forsaken on Calvary, in the God who comes to you incognito on the road, who comes *as light and truth to lead you to his holy hill and to his dwelling, who prepares a table before the presence of your enemies*, who makes himself known in the breaking of the bread. Hope in this God and you will again praise him, your help and your God.

What does all this have to say about Christian mission in a postmodern world? Let me recapitulate what I said at the beginning. We have had our noses rubbed in the fact that reality is not all it was cracked up to be. What we thought were hard facts have turned out to be somebody's propaganda. We have been startled to discover that the autonomous self, so highly prized from eighteenth to the twentieth centuries within the Western world, not least in some versions of Christianity, has been deconstructed into a puzzling turmoil of various forces and drives. We have watched as the postmodern world has torn down the controlling stories by which modernity, including Christian modernity, ordered its world. All we are left with is the great postmodern virtual smorgasbord, where you can pick or choose what you want.

How are you to address this world with the gospel of Jesus? You cannot just hurl true doctrine at it. You will either crush people or drive them away. That's actually no bad thing, because mission and evangelism were never actually a matter of throwing doctrine at people's heads. They work in far more holistic ways by praxis, symbol, and story, as well as by what we in a somewhat modernist way think of as "straightforward" exposition of "truth." I am reminded of Saint Francis's instructions to his followers as he sent them out: "Preach the gospel by all means possible," he said, "and if it's really necessary, *you could even use words*." I am reminded, too, of the power of symbolic praxis to go beyond words when I think of one of the greatest ballerinas of all time. After one of her great performances, somebody had the temerity to ask her what the dance *meant*. Her reply was simple, and it speaks volumes to us as we consider mission in the postmodern world. "If I could have said it," she said, "I wouldn't have had to dance it."

I am suggesting, in fact, that if postmodernism functions as the death of modernist culture, many of us will find selves somewhat like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We as Western Christians have for the most part rather too heavily bought into modernism, and we are shocked to discover that it has been dying for some time—indeed, that by now it is more or less completely dead. In this state of shock, we need to listen for the hidden stranger on the road who will explain to us how it was that these things had to happen, and how it is that there is a whole new world out there waiting to be born, for which we are called to be midwives. The answer to the challenge of postmodernism is not to run back screaming into the arms of modernism, even if that were possible—it is not. The answer to the challenge of postmodernism is to hear in postmodernity God's judgment on the follies and failings, the sheer selfish arrogance of modernity and to look and pray and work for the resurrection into God's new world out beyond. We live at a great cultural turning point. Christian mission in the postmodern world is a matter of the church grasping the initiative (perhaps particularly in planning for the millennium celebrations) and helping our world to turn the corner in the right direction.

We must get used, therefore, to a mission that includes living the true Christian praxis. Christian praxis consists in the love of God in Christ being poured out in us and through us. If this is truly happening, it cannot be damaged by the postmodern critique, hermeneutics of suspicion, or anything else. We must get used to telling the story of God, Israel, Jesus, and the world as the true metanarrative, the story of healing and self-giving love. We must get used to living as those who have truly died and risen with Christ so that our self, having been thoroughly deconstructed, can be put back together, not by the agendas that the world presses upon us, but by God's spirit.

Those who find themselves caught up in the story, who learn to reorder their lives according to the symbols, are summoned again and again. The summoning is a part of the truth. Again and again, we understand God (insofar as we ever do) only when the story, the symbol, and the praxis come together in our own lives: when we in turn go though Psalms 42 and 43, from despair to worship, when we in turn walk sorrowfully on the road to Emmaus only to find our hearts burning within us at the opening of scripture, our eyes opened to the presence of God in Christ m the breaking of the bread, and our feet suddenly energized to go and tell the Good News to others.

My judgment, therefore, is that the present cultural crisis in the Western world is not to be wished away as a silly and transient phenomenon. Postmodernity often may be expressed in silly and ephemeral ways, but the basic critique of modernist arrogance, including Christian modernist arrogance, is right on target. What we must not do, I believe, is pretend that it has not really happened; that would be like the two disciples trying to pretend that Jesus had not really been crucified, that he was still around somewhere, and that everything was really all right. It might have been pleasant for them to hold on to their earlier dreams, but they would have been living a lie, not the truth. To admit that the world really did kill Jesus was not to connive with the world's evil, to sup with the devil; it was simply to recognize the truth.

But nor can we construct a Christian worldview from within postmodernity itself. Our task is to discover in practice what the equivalent of the resurrection might be within our culture and for our times. There is no way back to the easy certainties of modernism, not even a "Christian" modernism. The only way is forward, forward into God's freshly storied world, forward with the symbols that speak of death and resurrection, forward

with the humble praxis of the gospel, and forward in that multilayered context with fresh thoughts, fresh arguments, and fresh intellectual understanding. Foolish ones, slow of heart to understand what God was up to! Was it not necessary that modernist versions of Christianity would die in order that truth might be freshly glimpsed, not as a set of doctrines or theories but as a person, and as persons indwelt by that person?

And how long must it be before we learn that our task as Christians is to be in the front row of constructing the post-postmodern world? The individual existential angst of the 1960s has become the corporate and cultural angst of the 1990s. What is the Christian answer to it? The Christian answer is the love of God, which goes through death and out the other side. What is missing from the postmodern equation is, of course, love. The radical hermeneutic of suspicion that characterizes postmodernity is essentially nihilistic, denying the very possibility of creative or healing love. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus we find the answer: the God who made the world is revealed in terms of a self-giving love that no hermeneutic of suspicion can ever touch; in a Self that found itself by giving itself away, in a Story that was never manipulative, but always healing and recreating; and in a Reality that can truly be known, a Reality that, being known, reveals a new dimension of knowledge, the dimension of loving and being loved.

We have a chance, as this century draws to a close, to announce this message to the world that so badly needs it. I believe we have this as our vocation: to tell the story, to live by the symbols, to act out the praxis, and to answer the questions in such a way as to become, in ourselves and our mission in God's world, the answer to the prayer that now rises, not just from one puzzled psalmist, but from the whole human race and indeed the whole of God's creation: *O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling*. And when we ourselves are grasped by that light and that truth by the strange glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we, from within the crisis of truth in the contemporary world, can say to those parts of our world that are still dismayed: *Why are you cast down? Why so disquieted? Was it not necessary that these things should happen? Hope in God; for we shall again praise him, our help and our God.*

Let me end with a parable, returning one more time to the story of the two on the road to Emmaus. To understand this parable, you need to know Matthew Arnold s poem "Dover Beach." In it Arnold describes—from within his mid-nineteenth century perspective—the way in which what he calls "the sea of faith" has emptied. Once, it was

> . . . at the full, and round earth's shore
>
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
>
> But now I only hear
>
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
>
> Retreating to the breath
>
> Of the night-wind down the vase edges drear
>
> And naked shingles of the world.3

Two serious-minded unbelievers are walking home together, trying to make sense of the world of the mid-1990s. The dream of progress and enlightenment has run out of steam. Critical postmodernity has blown the whistle on the world as we knew it.

Our two unbelievers walk along the road toward Dover Beach. They are discussing, animatedly, how these things can be. How can the stories by which so many have lived have let us down? How shall we replace our deeply ambiguous cultural symbols? What should we be doing in our world now that every dream of progress is stamped with the word "Babel"?

Into this conversation comes Jesus, incognito. (It is just as well that they do not recognize him, since modernism taught them to disbelieve in all religions, and now postmodernism has rehabilitated so many that Jesus is just one guru among dozens.) "What are you talking about?" he asks. They stand there, looking sad. Then one of them says, "You must be about the only person in town who doesn't know what a traumatic time the twentieth century has been. Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx were quite right. We had a war to end wars, and we've had nothing but wars since. We had a sexual revolution, and now we have AIDS and more family-less people than ever before. We pursued wealth, but we had inexplicable recessions and ended up with half the world in crippling debt. We can do what we like, but we've all forgotten why we liked it. Our dreams have gone sour, and we don't even know who 'we' are any more. And now even the church has let us down, corrupting its spiritual message with talk of cosmic and political liberation."

"Foolish ones," replies Jesus. "How slow of heart you are to believe all that the Creator God has said. Did you never hear that God created the world wisely? And that he has now acted within his world to create a truly human people? And that from within this people he came to live as a truly human person? And that in his own death he dealt with evil once and for all? And that he is even now at work, by his own Spirit, to create a new human family in which repentance and forgiveness of sins are the order of the day, and so to challenge and overturn the rule of war, sex, money, and power?" And then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, and now also the apostles and prophets of the New Testament, Jesus interpreted to them in all of the scriptures the things concerning himself.

The three arrived together at Dover Beach. The sea of faith, having retreated with the outgoing tide of modernism, was full again as the incoming tide of postmodernism proved the truth of Chesterton's dictum that when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything. On the shore there stood a vast, hungry crowd. They had cast their bread upon the retreating waters of modernism, and now they discover that the incoming tide of postmodernism is bringing them bricks and centipedes instead.

The two travelers began wearily to open a small picnic basket, totally inadequate for the task of feeding so many. Gently Jesus took it from them, and then in what seemed like moments he had gone to and fro on the beach until everyone had been fed. Then the eyes of them all were opened, and they realized who he was, and he vanished from their sight.

Then the two travelers said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us on the road, as he told us the story of the creator and his world, and his victory over evil?"

And they rushed back to tell their friends of what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known in the breaking of the bread.

Actually, that is not a story. It is a play, a real-life drama. And the part of Jesus is to be played by you and me. This is Christian mission in a postmodern world. *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

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1 It matters not how strait the gate,

How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate;

I am the captain of my soul.

--William Ernest Henley, Echoes, 1888

2 E. Earle Ellis, The Gospel of Luke (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1966), 192.

3 Mathew Arnold, "Dover Beach," 1867.