

and sober investigation and I know stimulated others. . . .

A man from Illinois

I have to write you this letter thanking you for works in recent years concerning the "historical Jesus." . . . As a Christian not willing to have a lobotomy, I find your honesty concerning what we really know about Jesus very refreshing. In an age when fundamentalists and their threats have cowed so many scholars from seeking the truth, your works stand out. . . . In fact, I would say that my faith has actually been strengthened by knowing and understanding the context in which Jesus lived and worked.

A man from Illinois

While a student in the 70s I was affiliated with the Catholic Worker movement, which emphasized the radical aspect of the teachings of Jesus. This experience inspired me to a career in geriatrics. I find that the dying are not comforted by the historical Jesus, they are more comforted by the good news proclaimed in its entirety followed by: "This is the word of the Lord." This includes the message . . . that proclaims an "empty tomb" and appearances to women, and Thomas, who was told to physically examine the wounds. If it is not true, then Christianity is a two-thousand-year hoax and fraud. As Paul states: Christians are the most miserable of the miserable if this complete message is poisoned by mythology.

A woman from Florida

I liked your book [Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography] and hope it will contribute to the long-range effect of putting Jesus' message in a more rational framework. It seems to me that your point of view may strengthen the message rather than weaken it—although I must say that over the years (I was raised a Methodist) I have found the whole idea of Jesus' resurrection, at least in the traditional sense, and the concept of a "life after death," that is, the idea that my consciousness will somehow survive my death, increasingly difficult to accept—even though I remain interested in religion and fond of my memories of church.

A man from Michigan

What Happened on Easter Sunday?

Your book cleans up "the story" for me; an accomplishment basic in any effort to restore the presentation of the Christian faith to a level of credibility vital to its survival as a major moral force in the world. . . . And, in our enlightenment, bonfires need not, must not, be put to the contrived stories of Jesus' descent from David, or the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection. . . . Let us keep and cherish them as the lovely myths that they are, the attesting poetry of the zealous, but let us be honest and simply recognize them for what they are, and know and accept them as such. . . . What the church should be and teach is far too important to be buried and obscured behind the centuries-accumulated wall of its careless and considered droppings.

A person from Vermont

I want to thank you for your two books on the historical Jesus. I have waited for these books ever since I was ten or twelve years old. [Writer is at least eighty-five years old at this time]. . . . You will be interested to know that there are some alert church members who are showing an interest in what you have written and who want to make a serious study of the historical Jesus.

A man from Iowa

The historical Jesus you described provided a new way for our church to think of Him that, if needed, enhances his stature in modern terms. . . . You have stimulated my religious curiosity

Works like yours that discredit Jesus bring accolades and high praise from a secular world but man does not have the last word. I am not a priest or a pastor but a Christian who cannot stand by while such attacks are being waged without speaking up. Remember, Jesus had to knock Saul off his mule and temporarily blind him in order to get his attention. Therefore, I challenge and invite you, in Christian love, to humble yourself and seek Him, then and only then will He make Himself known to you as He did me and you won't have to question His divinity or His resurrection—you will know—He is risen!!

A man from West Virginia

The statement [attributed to Dr. Crossan in the Chicago Tribune Magazine of July 17, 1994 by Jeff Lyon] about Jesus not resurrecting from the dead is absurd. Are you trying to say that after his execution He did not rise from the dead? In other words you think that he is still dead. Well, as far as I'm concerned, my Jesus is alive because he lives inside my heart. I can also see his wonders every day. He keeps me alive by the air I breathe. He protects me, feeds me, clothes me, and supplies my needs. So how dare you say He never resurrected from the dead. Even the Bible says so.

A girl from Illinois

What about Easter Sunday?

In discussing the crucifixion, I argued that the story of Jesus' burial by his friends was totally unhistorical. If he was buried at all, he was buried not by his friends but by his enemies. And not in a tomb hewed out of stone, but in a shallow grave that would have made his body easy prey for scavenging animals. Those are grim conclusions, but I cannot escape them.

With the Easter stories, are we standing on the solid rock of historical fact? Or, if not, how are we to account for

the survival of faith in Jesus? And if we decide that we cannot read the Easter narratives literally, then how *are* we to read them? I raise these questions not just because for some twentieth-century people the notion of resurrection from the dead seems incredible on the face of it. I raise these questions also because the New Testament record forces me to raise them. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the Easter story quite differently—so differently, in fact, that we simply cannot harmonize their versions. So we have to ask questions of intention and meaning.

In a nutshell, these are my conclusions: First, the Easter story is not about the events of a single day, but reflects the struggle of Jesus' followers over a period of months and years to make sense of both his death and their continuing experience of empowerment by him. Second, stories of the resurrected Jesus appearing to various people are not really about "visions" at all, but are literary fiction prompted by struggles over leadership in the early Church. Third, resurrection is one—but only one—of the metaphors used to express the sense of Jesus' continuing presence with his followers and friends.

So you're saying that the Easter story is just a fairy tale—a sort of Hollywood happy ending

No, I'm not saying that at all. But you could certainly get that impression if you just read the accounts in the gospels uncritically. You know how the story goes: Friday was tragic, Saturday was desolate, on Sunday the tomb was empty and all was well.

It's perfectly true that Jesus' followers fled when he was taken and executed. And that's entirely understandable. But it's a terrible trivialization to suppose that they all lost their faith on Friday and miraculously got it back on Sunday. I have tremendous respect for those first Christians. I think

that, far from losing their faith when Jesus was killed, they kept it alive and even deepened it.

But what about the empty tomb?

Is the story of the empty tomb historical? No. I've already explained why I doubt there was any tomb for Jesus in the first place. I don't think any of Jesus' followers even knew where he was buried—if he was buried at all. And the gospel writers don't come close to agreeing with each other on what they report. So my conviction is that motives other than just history writing are clearly at work here.

By the way, Paul is the earliest writer we have on resurrection—his letters are much earlier than the gospels—and he nowhere shows awareness of having heard an empty tomb story. That's hard to understand, if an empty tomb was supposed to be the bedrock historical fact of Easter.

Well, what are the bedrock historical facts, then?

Let's look for a moment completely outside the records produced by Christians. Are there any "outside" witnesses we can call upon for some help? The answer is yes.

First, there is the Jewish historian I've often referred to, Josephus. Writing near the end of the first century, he describes Jesus as a wise man "who wrought surprising feats," was accused by high-standing Jewish leaders, and put to death by Pilate. But, Josephus adds, "those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him," so that "the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared."

The second witness is the Roman historian Tacitus, writing early in the second century. He mentions that

"Christus" had been sentenced to death by the procurator Pontius Pilate. Then, with a sneer, he notes that the "pernicious superstition" of his followers, far from being snuffed out, even found its way to Rome, "where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue."

So we have two outside sources, one neutral in tone and one insulting. But both agree on the outline of what happened. There was a movement over there in the "colony." Its founder was executed by Pilate. But, instead of ending there, as might have been expected, the movement continued, and has now reached Rome itself. Tacitus and Josephus, of course, are not Christians, and don't speak of "resurrection." But they do witness to *unexpected continuity* in the movement connected with Jesus.

That's a long way from resurrection, though.

Perhaps. But maybe resurrection is simply a word-picture of Jesus' continuing presence among his followers.

In the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, only one title is ever used of Jesus. He is called simply the "Living Jesus." His followers experience him as the Wisdom of God on earth, still present and acting, just as when he was walking around their countryside. Those missionaries we talked about earlier, sent out by Jesus to offer free healing and share open meals in the homes and hamlets of Galilee—do you really think they just dropped everything the day he died? Just immediately all lost their faith? No. I think that they found themselves just as empowered as they had been before. And that meant that somehow Jesus was still with them. So they struggled to find a way to express that powerful and empowering *presence* of Jesus. That way *was* the Easter story.

You talked about Easter as not one day, but a period of months or even years. What do you mean by that?

What I mean is that Jesus' execution forced his followers to wrestle with some very tough questions. How could he have come to such a fate? How could Jesus have suffered a disgraceful death at the hands of imperial authority and still be what their experience persuaded them he was—God's wisdom and power? You might picture two different groups of Christians. The itinerant missionaries in Galilee worked it out with their hot, sore feet as they walked from house to house continuing his mission. The more scholarly sorts in Jerusalem pored over the texts of their scriptures to understand what had happened. Not because they had *lost* their faith, but because they were trying to *understand* and *explain* how it was that their faith persisted in spite of what had happened.

The Emmaus Road story in Luke 24, mentioned in Chapter 6, is a good example. Think about it not as a single day that you could have caught on your camcorder if you had been there, but as a pictorial summary of the whole rethinking struggle I described above. See if it makes sense to you that way.

In the story, the two itinerant missionaries are going out on Easter Sunday from the Jerusalem community toward Emmaus, seven miles down the road. As they walk, they're deep in sorrow, talking about the terrible events of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. A stranger joins them and asks what they're discussing. They can't believe he doesn't know what's been happening, and tell him about the execution of Jesus, who was "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." And they report the strange tales of women who had found his tomb empty. The stranger rebukes them for being "slow of heart" in believing what the Jewish scriptures say, and asks rhetorically, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

But Cleopas and his companion still don't understand who they're talking to. When they approach Emmaus, the stranger appears intent on going on, but they talk him into staying with them. They go in to eat. Listen to the story:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That's the story. If you ask me whether it's historical in the sense of being a straightforward account of what happened to two people on Easter Sunday, I say no. But it is *certainly* historical in the sense of describing a *process over time* that happened in the Christian community. That is, they did come to believe that the Living Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." They did find in their tradition the hints they were looking for that, despite his ignominious death, Jesus was the agent of God's purpose. And he did keep meeting them "in the breaking of the bread." That is, as Christians continued to gather for the open communal meals to which Jesus had introduced them, they experienced him as present. Continuing to empower them for the work of the Kingdom, he was the "Living Jesus."

You might put it this way: the Emmaus story isn't a fact, but it is true. It's a symbolic picture of Christian faith deepening over time. Easter was much, much more than the events of a single day.

Okay, that makes sense. But I still want to go back to the idea of resurrection. After all, that seems to be a central New Testament claim. Right?

Right. I'm saying that resurrection is only one of several ways that Christians could think about their experience of "Jesus-with-us." So the question is where that emphasis on resurrection comes from. And the answer is: from Paul.

If you look at 1 Corinthians 15, you find Paul—and this is twenty to forty years before the gospels were written—defending the idea of bodily resurrection. But here's a very interesting twist: He never argues that resurrection was a special miracle only for Jesus. Just the opposite: Jesus' resurrection is for him one instance of a *general* resurrection.

It's easy to see how he develops his argument. Before his conversion, Paul had been a devout Pharisee—and Pharisees believed that God would raise up the righteous dead at the end of "this present age." Paul, as you know, was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians when he had an experience that we would call *vision* or *trance*—a blinding light, a voice, a fall to the ground. To Paul, this was an encounter with the Jesus he was attacking. How would he understand this experience of Jesus? I think the answer is that he would conclude that *the general resurrection has begun*. In fact, that's exactly the way he describes his belief: Jesus is "the first fruits of those who have died." Given his expectation of a general resurrection, his experience of Jesus would persuade him that it had in fact begun. Jesus isn't the *only* one to be raised, just the *first*.

It is significant that Paul does not say, "If Christ's tomb is not empty, vain is our faith," but, "if Christ is not risen, vain is our faith." He is not talking about the resuscitation of Jesus' corpse but about the presence of Jesus in a wholly new mode of existence. It is, for Paul, the same Jesus who once was an earthly presence limited by time and place, who now is a transcendent presence unlimited by time and place.

So Paul was wrong about the resurrection?

No, I'm not saying that Paul was wrong. Just that his experience was *his* experience—not everybody else's. But I don't see any reason to believe that *all* of Jesus' followers would have reasoned the same way. After all, most of them were peasants, not Pharisees like Paul with a sophisticated training in interpretation of scripture. And since Paul had been a bitter enemy of the movement, his trance-experience would have been a unique outworking of his own psychological conflict. So I don't see any reason to suppose that either his experience or the way he interpreted it (that is, as a meeting with a resurrected Jesus) was typical of other Christians. As I said before, those peasant followers in Galilee knew Jesus' presence in their sore feet. Those scribes in Jerusalem were meeting him again in their study of scripture. So Paul's use of the category of resurrection was just one possible way of talking about the presence and power of Jesus in the lives of his followers.

In fact, I'd go even further. Paul's image of Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" depends upon the notion that the full harvest is at hand. But if that isn't the case, the metaphor doesn't work very well. If Paul were here today, I might ask him, "Paul, we've been waiting a long time since the 'first fruits' for that harvest you talked about. Maybe you weren't quite right about that general resurrection being just around the corner. Is there a better way to talk about Jesus' presence among us than 'resurrection?'"

How do you personally think about it? What is your own Easter faith?

Easter means for me that the divine empowerment which was present in Jesus, but once upon a time limited to those people in Galilee and Judea who had contact with him, is now available to anyone, anywhere in the world,

who finds God in Jesus. As far as I'm concerned, it has nothing to do, literally, with a body coming out of a tomb, or a tomb being found empty, or visions, or anything else. All those are dramatic ways of expressing the faith. The heart of resurrection for me is that the power of God is now available through Jesus, unconfined by time or space, to anyone who believes and experiences it.

But what about all the stories of the risen Jesus appearing to people? If Easter for you doesn't have anything to do with visions or a literal resurrection, what do you do with all those stories?

That's a very important question. Let me tell you what I've concluded, and then give an illustration or two.

We usually regard those stories of post-Easter appearances by Jesus as visions of some sort. I think they're nothing of the kind. They have no marks that you would expect—no blinding lights, no heavenly voices, nobody knocked to the ground. Neither does Jesus bring back from “the other side” some new revelation, as you might expect. Rather, what really matters is *who Jesus appears to*. That is, these stories are dramatizations with a political purpose. And that purpose is to tell us who's in charge, now that Jesus is no longer personally present.

Here's the clearest example. In John 20, you have a story of a race by two disciples to the empty tomb. Peter and the unnamed follower called the Beloved Disciple run toward the tomb. The Beloved Disciple outraces Peter, gets to the tomb, looks in and is the first to see the discarded linen wrappings. Because there was an older tradition that *Peter* had been the first to the tomb, he is allowed in this version to actually enter the tomb first. But when the Beloved Disciple next enters the tomb, he alone is said to *see and believe*. Thus he takes first place away from Peter.

But there's more. Next to be subordinated to the Beloved Disciple is Mary Magdalene. In Matthew's gospel (28:8–10) she meets and worships the risen Jesus. But here in John she fails to recognize Jesus when he appears to her, and three times gives the wrong interpretation of the empty tomb: “They have taken away my Lord.” And finally, the Beloved Disciple is exalted over Thomas, whom we have immortalized as “Doubting Thomas.” In this story he refuses to believe unless and until he can personally see and touch the wounds from the crucifixion. When Jesus does appear to him, he is rebuked in words that at the same time honor the Beloved Disciple: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Stories like that tell us absolutely nothing of historical value about the origins of Christian faith. But they tell us a great deal about the origins of Christian *authority*. They are competing pictures about who has priority and power in the early Christian community. John 20, for example, tells us that in the community of the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene's authority had to be challenged as much as that of Peter or Thomas. And, of course, we have outside the New Testament a *Gospel of Peter*, a *Gospel of Mary*, and a *Gospel of Thomas*. Stories like this presume a community that has been around for a long time—probably for one or two generations. But they really have nothing to do with appearances on Easter Sunday. They are dramatizations about where power and authority rest in the early Church.

And they're not entirely innocent stories, either. If you read them carefully, you'll find that the trend is away from Jesus' egalitarian community toward investing authority either in a leadership group (the Twelve) or in specific individuals (e.g. Peter or the Beloved Disciple). Already we're on our way toward a church led by a male hierarchy. And that's a long way from where Jesus started.

So the "appearance" stories aren't the historical record of one day—Easter Sunday—right?

That's what I'm arguing, yes. There may well have been visions, of course. There are always visions in religion, and Paul certainly had a vision of Jesus. My point is that those stories in the last chapters of the gospels are not and were not intended to describe visions.

Then summarize if you will what we are left with, historically.

What happened historically is that those who believed in Jesus before his execution *continued* to do so afterward. Easter is not about the start of a new faith but the continuation of an old one. Despite his crucifixion, Jesus was for his followers alive, present, and empowering them to do the work of the Kingdom still. That's the only mystery and the only miracle, and as far as I'm concerned, it's more than enough of both. Of course, there may have been visions and trances. There are always such in every religion, and I've no reason to think that Paul was alone in his. But the basic reality is that those whom Jesus empowered as healers and invited around an open table kept his vision and program alive, and continued to experience his presence in that vision and program. That, to me, is Easter.

Do you personally believe in life after death for us?

First, a little bit of history. In the entire Old Testament until the time of the Maccabees in the second century before Jesus, there is not the slightest hint of belief in an afterlife, even though the whole world around Israel believed it. As far as those scriptures were concerned, God

was eternal but people, even God's people, were not. If they had eternal life, it was by being part of God's people because God's people as a community lived on. I've looked at Jewish grave engravings from the second and third centuries of our era, and even then the views are mixed, some with belief in afterlife, some not. So belief in life after death has certainly not always been part of biblical faith.

Second, I think we need to raise a question: Is the primary purpose of God to guarantee our immortality? It would seem to be so for many people to whom, if there is no immortality, there's no sense of even believing in God.

Third, I do think that part of our human need is to create what I call "metaphors of immortality." That is, we all need something bigger than ourselves to live for, and something bigger than ourselves to live on after us. That may be a family, a nation, an organization, a church, or whatever is authentically and communally greater than our own individuality. A metaphor of immortality gives life and death meaning.

Do I personally believe in an afterlife? No, but to be honest, I do not find it a particularly important question one way or the other. I am not in the least bit interested in fighting those who believe or hope in it. My own interest is in how we live our lives here below. I am sure that we are called to do the will of God "on earth, as in heaven." Heaven, however, I leave up to God. Earth is where our responsibility lies, that is where the Kingdom of God is lost or found.

But if we build the meaning of this present life on its being eternal, I'm pretty sure we're wrong. Or if we use the prospect of eternal life to dull us to the present world and its injustices, we're wrong. If there is not enough meaning in life that we must imagine having it in a future life, we're wrong. I think those in earlier generations who painted pictures of hell as well as heaven had it right—they saw both good and evil in the human story. Their problem was that

they banished heaven and hell to the future. Our problem is that we try to believe in heaven without facing hell. My view is that both heaven and hell are present here and now. We make life. We make this world heaven or hell. So far, and in general, we have made it more hell than heaven. To put it in biblical terms: either we try to fashion the world in the image of the Kingdom Jesus envisioned, or we abandon it to the world's Caesars and Pilates.

How Do You Get from Jesus to Christ?

Earlier tonight my friend came by with his son.

I read him a couple of lines from Crossan

having to do with forms of peasant resistance.

I do not say anything about Jesus to my friend

although he is always more than kind when I do.

In fact, I discuss Jesus more

with my Buddhist friends than I do with Christians.

This is a painful fact. Let me quote one sentence:

"Open commensality has been both ritualized,

which was probably inevitable,

and ruined, which was not."

I have not been a model of faith.

I have been nowhere all night waiting for this book.

A man from Washington

For Dominic: You have provided a framework within which I could say I am a Christian—something I have not been able to say for very many years.

A person from Minnesota

I apologize to you, for the damage I did to you during my undergraduate studies in Christianity. . . . Without so much as having even opened one of your books, [my classmates and I] badgered you and then dismissed you in what we labeled your

turpitude. . . . I received the book [Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography] as a present but didn't read it until recently. . . . I believe that you have raised serious questions which demand the soulful attention of all religious people. . . . Your writing bears the mark of aweiful, soul-empowering inspiration. You have shown me how to open some doors for myself—to have the courage to question what I know I should question. I will pray for the strength of heart that you've demonstrated in your book.

A man from Virginia

Most United Kingdom clergy, for example, take for granted that Jesus said or did everything that is recorded in the Gospels. Our group finds it increasingly irksome having to endure sermons and lectures which ignore the most elementary conclusions of biblical scholarship. Living with the gap is challenging. On the one hand, it enables us to speak with nonchurchgoing professionals about Jesus and his followers in ways which do not insult their intelligence and integrity. On the other hand, the paradigm shift has such radical consequences for normal church discourse and worship that very few church people can face them. Do you also encounter this gap?

A group from England

You intimated somewhat through your writing that you did not believe historically, and I would venture to say personally, that Jesus was the Son of God, as is accepted in orthodox Christianity. And so I wonder what exactly your impression of modern-day Christianity is? What do you think of the millions of people who believe in a future Kingdom of God based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus, the atonement of mankind's sin through his sacrificial death, and the concept of eternal salvation as being a gift according to the grace of God, do you think that they are all misled and wrong?

A woman from California

Let's suppose your picture of the historical Jesus is right on tar-

get. What does that mean for me as a disciple of Jesus? In concrete terms, what would following Jesus look like today? How should Christians live today?

A man from Virginia

It's time for a summing-up. If someone who had never heard of Jesus asks you to tell his story in just two or three minutes, what would you say?

I'd say that Jesus lived in an occupied land, among peasants who had long existed at a subsistence level and were being pressed harder and harder. It was a world of structured inequality and injustice. In *that world*, he offered and lived out an alternative vision. And he invited others to share it: a community of free healing and shared eating, a community of equals before God and each other. To women, children, men, to lepers, the destitute, the disturbed, he issued the same invitation: Come eat with me and be healed, and take what you experience to others. That new community was what the Kingdom of God looked like, what the whole world would look like if God, not Caesar, were directly in charge. That is what it means for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven.

But "heaven" was in good shape—*earth* was the problem. That's why Jesus didn't just talk about the Kingdom, but *acted it out*. He plowed the vision of the Kingdom into the soil of his own society. That made him a revolutionary figure—not in a military sense, but in a social sense. And he died for his vision of the Kingdom. Though his sharp challenge to the usual arrangements of his world could have gotten him arrested at any time, his symbolic destruction of the Temple provided the immediate excuse for high Jewish and Roman authorities to move against him. And we can hardly even imagine the brutal offhandedness with which a peasant nobody-like Jesus would have been crushed in a

Jerusalem under the likes of Caiaphas and Pilate.

But what was totally unexpected was that the end of this troublesome Jewish peasant was not the end after all. Those who had originally experienced God's power through their life together with him continued to experience it after his death. Now that power was no longer confined by time or place, but was available anywhere to those who saw God in him. That is why the prudently neutral historian Josephus reported at the end of the first century that "those who had in the first place come to love him, did not give up their affection for him . . . and the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day, not disappeared."

Such is my picture of the historical Jesus. In his offer of free healing and common eating he announced and created a community that was his *no* to the established hierarchical, patronal patterns of his society. Lest he himself be interpreted as simply the new broker of a new God, he moved on constantly, never settling down. He would not be a mediator, but rather the announcer that no mediator should exist between persons, or between persons and God. He announced, in other words, the unmediated or brokerless Kingdom of God.

One of your critics has suggested that your emphasis on Jesus as a peasant resister in an imperial colony comes out of your own experience of growing up in Ireland under British rule. Is that possible?

Well, it's certainly true of all of us that what we see depends on where we stand when we look. If you are a woman in a male-dominated society, or an African-American in a white-dominated society, for example, you may indeed see realities that others either miss or deny. And in that sense, no doubt I grew up unlikely to see empire as a benign reality. But if so, I'd say that my life

experience led me to see something that was really going on with and around Jesus—not to *invent* it.

I grew up among the first generation of post-colonial Irish as the British Empire was beginning to decline. I certainly learned what awful things Britain had done to Ireland—but I also received a classically British education, including texts chosen to prepare British youths to administer the Empire. And while my paternal grandparents were lower class peasant farmers, my maternal grandparents were middle class urban shopkeepers. I repeat: I hope that my background sensitized me to injustice, in the first century as well as the twentieth, but I deny that it moved me to invent first-century evidence that wasn't really there.

The Jesus you reconstruct—moving among peasants to rebuild society "from the bottom up"—sounds a lot like the Jesus of Latin America's liberation theology.

If so, it's not because I am a student of liberation theology. If the historical Jesus fits into the Latin American situation, perhaps it is because that situation actually resembles his.

Think, for example, of Archbishop Oscar Romero. In the late 1970s he became Archbishop of San Salvador, in a land where a tiny wealthy elite controlled politics, economics, and the military while the vast majority lived in peasant poverty. Historically, the Church had identified with the interests of the elite. But Romero, as a good pastor, went out among the people—and the people converted their bishop. He began to speak out forcefully, both against unjust privilege and violence on the political right, and against violence and ideology on the guerrilla left.

Against those who wanted a gospel "so disembodied that it doesn't get involved at all in the world it must save," he insisted that "God is doing *now*" what Christ did *then*:

"shaking off oppressive yokes, bringing joy to hearts, sowing hope." He became the voice for the voiceless: those in shacks and shanty towns, coffee harvesters, the "disappeared" and tortured. Only the person who is concerned for the hungry, the naked, the poor, the tortured, he said, "has God close at hand." Mere charity, he insisted, is not enough, for it is "a caricature of love to try to cover over with alms what is lacking in justice." In the words of his Christmas Eve homily in 1979:

We must not seek the child Jesus in the pretty figures of our Christmas cribs.

We must seek him among the undernourished children who have gone to bed tonight without eating, among the poor newsboys who will sleep covered with newspapers in doorways.

Accused by politicians and media of supporting subversion, he denied the charge—"unless the gospel is to be called subversive, because it does indeed touch the foundations of an order that should not exist, because it is unjust." Predictably—and he was aware of the fate awaiting him—Archbishop Romero was murdered by a death squad while saying Mass, in Lent, 1980.

But, like the Jesus story, it didn't end there. When, thirteen years later, a group of scholars gathered in Chicago for a symposium on my historical research, I was moved by the reflections of Catherine Keller, who teaches in the Theology School of Drew University. She had recently returned from El Salvador, where she admitted "that for the first time in my life the early Christian story became real for me." There she encountered a grassroots community organized around *eating* (for example, taking food to university students held in prison, and not fed by the government) and *healing* of bodies and psyches.

Though the "resurrected Romero" appeared on murals

everywhere, she said, "he appears on a continuum with all the other people's martyrs, male and female, who gave their life for the people—precisely *not* in any grotesque attempt to satisfy God through an atoning sacrifice, but by sharing their lives so fully that the death forces could not tolerate them." She found people living boldly in the face of death—with "zest and high good humor, a delight in the sensuality of terrestrial life, an iridescent hope (not optimism), combining itself with clear critical analysis of history and global politics." In such community, she said, she felt close to what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Crucifixion and resurrection became present realities for Keller through one Salvadoran woman's sense of the legacy of her mother, who had been abducted, raped, and murdered because of her commitment to justice: "The evil forces were not able to stop what for her had meant life."

Who can hear such a story and not recognize in our own generation the continuing reality and power of the gospel of the Kingdom?

Your picture of the historical Jesus—how does it fit with Church teachings about him?

The question deserves a book of its own! But let me try to put it in a nutshell. Our term "Jesus Christ" sums up the issue. "Jesus" is the historical person; "Christ" affirms who he is for believers. "Christ" comes from a Greek word which means the same as "Messiah" which comes from a Hebrew word. Both mean "the Anointed One" and they sum up Jewish hopes for a God-sent deliverer. "Jesus Christ" is thus not a first and last name, but a name and a title: "Jesus who is the Christ (Messiah)."

Christian faith is always *faith in the historical Jesus as a manifestation of God to us*. Faith is more than historical reconstruction. Someone might think that I had done a good job

of scholarly research and say, "That's all very interesting, about Jesus' itinerancy, his challenge to conventional lifestyle, his open meals . . . but nothing I want to organize *my* life around." It's possible to accept the historical facts but to conclude that Jesus was utopian, or mistaken, or flaky, or whatever. Christian *faith* means finding in the picture of the historical Jesus the power and wisdom of God—and then getting serious about its implications for *our* lives, now.

So faith goes beyond the historical *facts* to wrestle with their *meanings*. But faith cannot ignore or bypass the historical facts. What we believe in by faith is the ultimate meaning of what we know by history. But the historical reconstruction informs the faith. If I find, for instance, that the historical Jesus called people into an "unbrokered" relationship with God, I can't very well put my faith in a Christ who is conceived as the sole mediator between God and humanity. If I find a Jesus who acts out the Kingdom around an open table, I can't invest faith in a Christ who is a social or moral segregationist. "Christ" is more than "Jesus," but not less. In short, if my faith in Christ doesn't interpret at the deepest level what I know about the historical Jesus, I'd better reexamine my faith.

Your books make a lot of sense to me, but I have a problem of sitting through church on Sunday and having lots of questions in my mind about what is going on. I find meaning in being part of the Church, but I also don't know what to make of this new way of understanding Jesus. What am I to do?

Well, some elements in any parish may, in fact, need to be reformed. If, for example, one has an authoritarian pastor, then I would say that is unacceptable. I don't see how there can be argument on that point—Jesus makes it plain

that masters are to behave like servants. He makes it plain that you can't be a Christian leader by playing boss. So I wouldn't have any patience with that kind of parish life.

As for the Eucharist, I would say that its meaning is that God and Jesus are present to us, as food, but *equally* for all. Nobody gets a bigger host or more wine than another, even in this ritualized form of a meal. The question is whether our present forms show some continuity with what Jesus was doing in his ministry. For me the sense of equality before God in the community of faith is absolutely central. Without that sense of equality the tie between Jesus' meal practice and the Eucharist is broken. So the critical question is: In our current forms of church life does our celebration reflect or break continuity with Jesus?

By the way, what I say about Eucharistic liturgy I would say also about a Pentecostal celebration. Take, for example, speaking in tongues. If worshipers draw the conclusion that those who speak in tongues are superior to others, that breaks the continuity with Jesus. If they draw the conclusion that the Spirit is equally available to all and is unpredictable, then they are in continuity with Jesus. That's the question about our forms, not whether they are exactly what Jesus did, but whether or not they are consistent with his basic emphasis. I would also ask: Is what we do in worship a once-a-week escape from the world, or is it a beachhead for Jesus' incursion into the world?

Will you say something about your own spiritual life and connection with the Church?

I spent twenty years of my life in a monastic order with four or five hours a day of formal prayer. I left the priesthood in 1969 because, as I indicated earlier, I wanted to marry, and also because of an acute distaste for how the Roman Catholic hierarchy operated. My intelligence and

my conscience were repeatedly insulted, and I was constantly in trouble for saying out loud what I had found in my research. I wanted to get away from that. I didn't want to have to constantly argue with the hierarchy and let them set my agenda. So I basically decided, "You leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone." But I have always considered myself a member of the Roman Catholic tradition and the Roman Catholic community. I just need a certain therapeutic distance, a certain strategic separation from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. But I would also say that I can no longer distinguish between prayer and study. If the function of prayer is to allow God to get at you, then scholarship is where that now happens for me. Someone asked me in an interview what I would do differently if I had my life to live over. I would do it exactly the same way over again, because I like the way it came out. If I had to do it all over again, I would spend twenty years in a monastery. If I had to do it all over again, I would also leave that monastery.

If you could wave a magic wand over the Church to produce any change that you wanted, what would it be?

I would reverse the entire method of decision making so that issues would be decided from the bottom up. I would want a church where there were *no magic wands* that anybody could wave from the top down. You know, if the Pope would say tomorrow that women can now be priests, I'm not at all sure that would be a good idea—simply because it would be pronounced from the top down. The world has changed from an authoritarian, hierarchical style of public life, and the Church never did change. Even the *language* has not changed since the time of the Roman Empire. When I was a monk in Rome, the allowance that I received for my living expenses was called by a Latin term that came down from what the Romans paid the slaves. What I think

we need in the Church is to generate maximum discussion about important issues, like birth control and abortion, instead of telling everyone what to think and do. So if I could wave a magic wand, I would get rid of the waving of magic wands.

My final query is a question about a question. If you got to ask Jesus one question, what would that question be?

One of the people who wrote to me did so under the guise of two letters to Jesus. I cannot think of any better questions to ask Jesus than the ones formulated in those letters. Here is a combined extract:

Dear Jesus,

A small group of us have just begun reading your biography by Dominic Crossan. At the rate we have started, we may never finish even his shorter version. One of the things Mr. Crossan does at the very beginning of this book is talk about your world, the world into which you came. His point, I believe, is that if we are to truly understand you we must try to know your context. (I've cheated and read ahead.) . . .

So very many of the issues seem different. I am part of a group that has political power, you were not. I can foster changes in the laws, you could not. I can help them be fairer or less fair, you could not. . . . I know it's imperfect, but I just can't believe you would have walked away from it. It can help people. Good laws, at their very best, are loving. I thought that was what we were all about. . . .

You seemed more than other great religious leaders to care about the lives of actual people, their pain, illness, grief. If we are to live life lovingly, does that not mean we are to use whatever loving tools we have to open the possibility for others? Does that hold for you as well? . . .

Is it possible that the words you were speaking then are

irrelevant to me in my situation? I cannot believe the intent, to be loving to one another, is outdated. . . .

I am increasingly afraid that in many cases you said exactly what you meant, instead of the watered-down version I have often chosen to swallow. Dr. Crossan has about convinced me that when you said, "Blessed are the poor, for they are the only ones who do not have dirty hands," you meant exactly that. This is a message which is neither comfortable nor palatable, and it is just one of many. What makes all this far worse is that Dr. Crossan is one of your followers who, at least in terms of biology, sees you as a man, conforming to the laws of physics as other men. Far from decreasing your status, in my mind at least, it increases it. It means that without any help from an E.T., an individual can live as you did and perhaps even die as you died. These are not comfortable thoughts. . . .

I have decided to ask three questions: (1) *What were you advocating as a life program in your time and place?* (Crossan is a great help in this, some of the first I have received that seems sensible); (2) *How does that message translate to me and to today?* (Crossan is helpful here, but he could do more in this respect . . . another book perhaps?); (3) *When I can answer number two above, passably well, I will ask: Do I agree with you? Can I do it—or, perhaps more honestly, am I willing to?*

I have a terrible feeling that I may find answers most uncomfortable. However, I believe I would rather say, "I think you were wrong" (however blasphemous that may sound) than try to fudge it all by maintaining you didn't actually say it. I also think I will be more at peace with myself (although not very) saying, "I can't do as you ask" than I will be if I am a hypocrite about what it is that you have asked. It seems to me that the weak fared better than the hypocrites when you were teaching. . . .

A woman from Ohio

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