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The Realism of Hope: The Feast of the Resurrection
and the Transformation of the Present Reality

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The Feast of the Resurrection and the Transformation of the Present Reality

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Some of the great festivals that Christians (in our country) celebrate appeal to us, some do not. In a way we respond to some of them, but others estrange us: we do not know what to do with them. Many people obviously feel that Christmas has value for them. Regardless of what they think about it, they nevertheless have the feeling that God comes close to them again and that in His nearness they find human warmth. The "Totensonntag" (Sunday of repentance and prayer, last in the Trinity season) affects people who mourn their dead. We can even understand Good Friday. When we see and hear how One who is forsaken by God dies on the cross, we sense that this death might have similarity to our fate.

But what is the situation as far as Easter and the resurrection of Christ are concerned? Is there anything we can do with that?

We do not particularly lack the faith to understand the message and to do something with it. We do lack the hope and the hunger for freedom to want to grasp what has really happened in the resurrection of Christ. We have become so timid and are so tired of hoping be-

cause we fear possible failures more than we expect success. The message we hear is over our heads. We have pulled our heads in and made ourselves so small that we no longer hear anything. Easter means Christ's resurrection, and resurrection means hope for us—this makes a considerable demand not only on our reason but even more so on the way we live.

Now, of course, we in the modern world are not the first to have this experience. As the New Testament assures us, the resurrection of Christ was the center of things. Faith was resurrection hope. You reminded yourself of everything that Jesus had done and spoken, because His death was not His end, but His resurrection was His true beginning. You expected from Him the fulfillment of everything that God had promised: freedom, justice, peace, a life finally satisfying and happy, which no longer knows death. In recollection and in anticipation you would remember the resurrection of the crucified Christ.

However, even in the early church the interest shifted. Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, crowded out the Feast of the Resurrection. Later Reformation and Pietism pushed the Passion and death of Christ into the foreground. Only since the Enlightenment the *Totenfest* — the day of repentance and prayer — gained in importance. How did these shifts in the center of the Christian faith come about?

Jurgen Moltmann published this essay under the title "Der Realismus der Hoffnung" in Kontexte, Vol. 1, 1965 (Stuttgart-Berlin: Kreuz Verlag). It is translated by Gilbert A. Thiele and published with permission.

Remarkably enough, they parallel the shift in faith's viewpoint from hope to remembrance, from the future to the past, from history that comes and achieves something new to eternity, which is forever. For the New Testament the resurrection of Jesus from death always signifies the general resurrection of the dead and the arrival of the Messianic kingdom of freedom from guilt and death. Since Jesus has awakened from death, the dead will live, the guilty will be pardoned, enemies will be reconciled, the miserable will rejoice. This fulfillment of Messianic hopes seemed for the disciples to come so close that they could practically touch and seize it. When they thought of Him, they thought of this future. Their faith in Christ was their hope for this future, and their hope for this future became certainty through their faith in Christ.

Yet faith also underwent a change as this hope that the future was coming, was indeed near at hand, was lost in the quicksands of history. The risen Christ was no longer start and present of such a future for this earth, but He was the "Eternalized One," the spiritualized man who had been taken up to God. You would believe that with Him you could get to heaven, but you no longer hoped to win the hope of a new earth. People believed in a heavenly life after death, but they no longer hoped for the destruction of death. One believed in the redemption of the soul from bodily pains, but one no longer hoped for the redemption of a worn-out body. All that Easter meant was: there is a life after death. When these dissolving processes corroded hope, the appreciation of Easter and the Resurrection was lost. Christianity, which had begun by infecting human-

ity with hope and the desire for freedom, as a Messianic and missionary movement changed into a worldly religion which saved the choicest riches of eternity for man.

Today this time is coming to an end. Christians therefore must try to think about their beginning, about their motivation, and about their true task. To me it does not seem to amount to this: arouse religious feelings, bring people to a faith in God—that there is a God—but to this: to use the message of the resurrection of the Crucified One to transmit that very power of hope which prepares one to take upon himself the cross of love, that hope that leads us toward a life of freedom. Easter cannot merely mean: There is a life after death. That sounds like hollow comfort. Easter has to mean: Life here and now changes, it becomes free of many burdens, pressures, free from guilt and from death.

In order to go a bit deeper, we have to ask ourselves what the New Testament actually meant with the expression "resurrection from the dead." Of course, one did not designate something especially wonderful with the expression, something that happened only to Jesus. Rather one associated therewith distinct hopes and expectations for oneself and for humanity.

To begin with, this expression is a comparison by which something incomparable is supposed to be described: As one awakes from sleep, then raises oneself and gets up, that is the way it is supposed to be with those who have to suffer death. The common course of being awakened, when it is time to get up, serves to express a totally unknown destiny up to now experienced by no man, which will first

await the dead. One can see at once that this comparison is quite inadequate. When one awakens in the morning, he goes back to the old life, one picks up the work, the suffering and the guilt, where he laid them down at night. We often go to sleep and get up again. But with death that comes to an end. Death is final. One does not only "go to sleep," as the saying goes, by way of concealing the harshness of dying, but one ceases to live. The awakening of the dead thus cannot mean that one is "again given back to life," for this life is over. Nor can resurrection from the dead mean that a merely sleeping life is again awake, for where everything is dead and a victim of death, one cannot awaken anything anymore. The expression is taken from our day-to-day experiences. But it wishes to indicate something that we have not yet experienced.

What is that? A life out of death that will never again be humiliated by death is meant. Resurrection from the dead therefore is not the return of a dead man into *this* life, which is headed for death, but a totally new life that has death behind it. It does not consist in the awakening of someone who is asleep. Rather Paul meant that this occurs through a new creation of God, who calls the nonexistent into existence, who makes the dead alive, in the same way He called the world out of nothing. The dead are waiting for a life and conditions of life of which God and of course also people will be able to say: "Behold it is all very good, for all things have been made new." Death is no more. Guilt is forgiven, evil is overcome, suffering has changed into happiness, tears have changed to joy.

All this put in its appearance for the

disciples in the Easter appearances of Jesus: They saw the one who died in the night of being forsaken by God and man in the glow of the arrival of the new creation. What had happened to Him whom they had seen die, who had met them in ways so hard to understand? No one was there, no one saw it, but in the entire material of their descriptions only one thing can be possible: He is risen from the dead, the new creation of the world begins with Him—freedom from the humiliation of death. He lives and we will also live. A new future from God begins to happen to a godless world. While the disciples say: He, Christ, is risen, they combine their hope for the future with their recognition of Christ and the understanding of Christ with their hope for the future. Thus it is quite understandable that people whom the future no longer gives any reason for hope don't know what to do with the resurrection of Christ. To the extent that the future becomes dark, Christ also becomes dark. One learns to understand Him only when one is led by hope.

But now, of course, we naturally have the feeling that all conceptions of the future and above all of a future after death are dreams, phantasies, speculations. We know nothing precise about the future. We would rather not believe anyone who says he knows anything about it. How can anyone speak about a future which is not even here? How can he talk about future history when he cannot have been there when it happened? What should we do with pictures of life after death before we have even fully experienced *this* life? Indeed we would be abusing Christian hope very badly if we would make it a wrestling mat for all of our unfulfilled

wishes! Then hope would really be only a false hope. This hope does not speak of just any old future. It speaks only of Christ and His future. The name of Christ is not a mere empty title. It describes the ground and reality of this hope.

The New Testament never simply says that Christ is risen and that now a glorious future for people begins. It always speaks of the Resurrection in connection with His cross, therefore also about hope in connection with suffering and the patience of love. Not every life gives reason for hope, but surely this life of Jesus does, the life that took upon itself the cross and death in love. In His death everything that is awry in human life, everything that is evil, inhuman, and against God is revealed. That is why in connection with His resurrection a passionate hope arises which accepts such suffering. This hope is realized in no empty dreams of the future, but always in opposition to the reality of godlessness and inhumanity that had become visible. Dreams of the future characteristically play down the value of the present. Man with his thoughts lives in a state of irreality which does not yet exist and which may never come about at all. Christian hope, on the other hand, conversely draws the future into the present, because the divine future became the present in the crucified Christ. This is where the future arrives.

There would be no contradiction in saying: Here and now there is one life, and after death another life is coming. Both would be separated by death and would have nothing to say to each other. But that would not be a living hope but postponement and delay. Hope first comes alive when the future is present and does

not allow the present to remain what it is. Hope for a life after death is not alive, but hope *against* death is. Resurrection hope proves its reliability in a present contradiction of real life against a life that is doomed to die in the opposition of justice against injustice, of peace against chaos. This hope does not cause man to be satisfied with his circumstances as they are. It is not merely a comfort in a wearisome life that is sentenced to death. The awakening of Christ from death is also God's protest against death and against the humiliation of man through his misery. If Paul calls death "the last foe" (1 Cor. 15:26) of God and man, then, conversely, the risen Christ and hope must be understood as enemies of death and of a world that has accommodated itself to death.

Hope, then, does not make one patient but impatient, not placid but restless. When a man does begin to hope, he can no longer be satisfied with things as they happen to be; he begins to suffer in behalf of this unredeemed world and because of the inhumanity in it. Only one who loves becomes vulnerable and suffers. Hope becomes a power of a love that is capable of suffering. If we would only be aware of what we see, we would end up either cheerful or distraught, we would shrug our shoulders and say, There is nothing to do about it. But that we are irritated by conditions, that we are not satisfied because reality and we cannot come to an amicable agreement, transforms unquenchable hope and the spark of love into a true life, a spark that hope ignites. Hope keeps people unsettled until the great fulfillment of all prophecies by God. Hope makes people hold their breath and keeps them open to the world, so that they strive to

overcome the given and the synthetic. Hope is a permanent disquiet, a longing for the true life from God and a suffering in a life without Him, the way one has to live it. Not comfort, not protest, not nightmarish enthusiasms but resistance, suffering, not escape but love—that is what hope brings into life.

If we discover that Christian faith thus becomes hope for a life of love and suffering, we must also say that the real sin is to be without hope. The church father Chrysostom says, "Not primarily our sins but rather our despair plunges us into disaster." Not only that man wants to be like God—who really wants that?—but much more that he does not want to be the man God wants him to be—this is what causes his misery. Frustration in life is the result of hopelessness, timidity, laziness, and depression, and the life is just barely bearable; it does not know anymore what to do with itself, and it lets itself be driven. One becomes guilty not only in the evil one commits but much more in the good that one fails to do. Not our misdeeds but our omissions accuse us. They accuse us of the lack of hope.

Hopelessness always takes two forms—it can become overconfidence, and it can become despair. Overconfidence is a badly timed, self-willed anticipation of what one hopes for from God. Despair is an equally self-willed anticipation that what is hoped for is impossible of fulfillment. Both rebel against the suffering of hope. Both want fulfillment right now or no hope at all. But as Joseph Pieper says so well, overconfidence as well as despair afflict with numbness and rigor mortis the truly human, which alone is capable of preserving hope steadily and unquestioningly. The

anguish of despair surely always consists in this, that a hope is there but a way to fulfillment is no longer visible. Then the hope which has been awakened turns against the one who hopes, and destroys him. In one of his novels Fontane says, "To live means to bury hopes." He portrays "dead hopes." Hopelessness would like to protect the soul against disappointments. We say, "To rest on hope makes one a dope." Then one gives up the future and clings to what one sees and has. No longer does one take risks, because that presupposes hope, but only keeps on consuming.

This despair with hope does not necessarily mean that we wear a long face. It can simply be the mute absence of sense, outlook, future, and purpose. It can show the face of smiling renunciation—*bonjour tristesse!* (good day to sorrow!). All that is left is a sort of smile of those who have tried all their options and have found nothing in them that would give them reason to hope. Pass up the world! It is nothing! It seems to me that there is scarcely a way of looking at things that is so widespread among the decadent products of a resigned Christianity and in the resulting post-Christian world as this *tristesse*, this knowing sadness, this aimless toying with a faded hope. To be sure, the motto of Sisyphus, the brave hero of our time, is "Keep a clear head—and don't hope." But does thinking with the head gain clarity, does action become meaningful without a horizon and without hope?

This giving up of hope can even promise happiness: Goethe considered hope a deception and a torture that hindered man from being really happy now in the present. Pascal had already complained: "We never are satisfied with the present. We

anticipate the future, as though it came too slowly. We remember the past in order to cling to it, because it disappears too fast. And thus we never really live, but are always hoping to live. Thus it is inevitable that in the anticipation of becoming happy we are never happy." One would like to shake off the burden of hope in order to give oneself entirely to the enjoyment of the moment. One who eternally lives in the future is never there at all, he is always already some other place. To live in hope can be something great, and it can also be something profoundly unreal.

Once more we should think of this, that hope did not originate in some dreamy game with unreal possibilities but presents us with a passion that was born out of suffering. Is there a happiness in the present that is unclouded and everlasting? Must one not forget what has been and what is coming, what others are suffering, in order to enjoy one's own good fortune? To be fully in the present, the eternal presence of God, these constitute the happiness for which Christians hope. That would be the salvation in which everything is healed and becomes whole and good and complete. But as long as there is guilt with which people make themselves and others unhappy, as long as death is a power which plunges all happiness into decay, one has to close one's eyes if he wants to think now that he is happy and whole. For one who has his eyes open, happiness, salvation, and real life are at first hidden, in that Christ who in love bears the world's guilt, suffering, and death.

Therefore hope does not bless the rich but the poor, the miserable, the lowly, the

offended, the guilt-laden, and the dying, as it is stated in the beatitudes of Jesus and guaranteed in His resurrection. One does not find happiness by looking away from the misery of the suffering. One finds happiness when in love for the lost he takes up the task and the suffering. But, of course, that takes patience. And to have patience one has to have hope. Patience is actually the art of everyday hope. The New Testament again and again speaks of "patience with hope." Paul says: "When we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." But what kind of patience is that?

Earlier we said that hope does not make patient but impatient. Hope does not put up with things, but it crowds the future. To have patience merely out of resignation would be hopelessness. Patience out of hope is something entirely different! The patience of Christian hope has its basis and model in the patience of Jesus, in His love, in His self-emptying (*kenosis*). If we want to generalize, we could say: True patience gives the other fellow time, it gives him freedom, it takes his possibilities into consideration, including the still unawakened possibilities of God for him; in other words, it grants him a future. Hope not only takes a man as he is, but it does pressure him with demands as to how he should behave. Patience has hope for the other fellow and opens up possibilities for him to change. As the saying goes, Hope gives him a chance. It sets him free.

Realism declares: Take the people as they are. Take things as they come. You can't change a thing. Revolutions, on the other hand, want to change the world by

putting people under pressure. Christian hope treats misery with tenderness, it bears misery in serene patience toward the hoped-for change. Through the patience of the one who hopes the coming freedom penetrates the unredeemed world, Christ's resurrection gives rise to patience and to

confidence against an impatient and despairing world.

Is there anything we can do with Easter?

I think you can start a life with it, a life that overcomes death in the patience of hope and wins that freedom which has been promised to man.