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C H A P T E R   O N E

## In the Beginning . . .

### *The Modern Quest for Christian Origins*

Tragedy is the form that promises us a happy ending. It is also the form that is realistic about the matter.

—WALTER KERR, *TRAGEDY AND COMEDY* (1967)

When the Romans completed their long war against Mediterranean piracy, every renegade harbor on Crete lay in ruins. Phalasarna, where I worked for five years, was likely the pirates' last stand, since the Romans marched from the east, and when it fell, the war was effectively over. The destruction is hard to describe; when Romans intended to put an end to things, they put a period to their imperial sentences. They put a period to Phalasarna, too, so effectively that the site was never occupied again—at least until the impressive archaeological discoveries there created a tourist industry in its wake, and the pretty olive fields and grazing hills were handed over to Eurotourism. That's when the bright marble facades and new hotels commenced.

Before they left, Roman soldiers toppled the leading fortification towers into the mouth of the narrow entrance

channel at Phalasarna, closing the harbor to all subsequent shipping. They burned or demolished the acropolis and all remaining battlements. They sowed salt into the soil so that nothing would grow. To this day, the little fishing harbor at Phalasarna lies on the opposite side of the great bay. The classical city was finished. And the task for Cretans in the next generation was to figure out how to start over, how to begin again.

Around the same time that Phalasarna fell, the Roman occupation of Palestine was nearing completion. Roman troops entered Jerusalem in the same decade that they finished off western Crete. What they could not have known at the time was how much trouble this Palestinian province would cause them. Revolutionary Jewish resentment simmered always just below the surface in Roman Palestine, and it boiled over twice into war (in 66–70 c.e. and again in 132–135), with horrific casualties and consequences. Jesus had been executed by the Roman civil administration in Palestine a generation before the first all-out war began. Whatever happened then, it is clear that he was executed by the Romans, not the Jews (Jewish religious courts did not have authority to render judgment in capital crimes under the Romans); hence he was likely executed as a political criminal and rabble-rouser. That is what execution by crucifixion symbolized in the outlying Roman provinces. As we now know, that event—the violent execution of the man his disciples “had hoped would save Israel”—represented a scandal that the first several generations of Jesus followers all felt the need to explain. Their strategies for doing so would vary, much as we might expect—from denying that it really happened, to denying that Jesus had a physical body for it

to happen to, to the even more radical answer that Mark provided: namely, that tragic suffering represents the real, if rocky, road to redemption.

Thirty-some years after Jesus's execution, the province of Palestine erupted in revolt. The end result of four years of carnage was another systematic march over a region in rebellion, an even bloodier repetition of what the Romans did on Crete. The archaeological record suggests that this was the worst destruction the city of Jerusalem ever experienced in its long and tortured history. Even the Temple in Jerusalem, which the Romans themselves had paid to rebuild, was destroyed. In their first two generations, then, the earliest followers of Jesus endured two hammer blows, both at the hands of the Romans. Their leader was condemned and executed in the most shocking way imaginable; then their homeland and their capital were destroyed. The primary task for these people lay in figuring out how to move on, how to begin again. The answer to that question lay, in part, in the invention of a new literary genre: the gospel.

Between the time of Jesus's execution and the destruction of Jerusalem, stories about Jesus began circulating orally throughout the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean. (Some later Christians who believed that "the body is a temple" actually equated these two disasters, the destruction of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple.) In this same forty-year interim, some Jews who had followed Jesus became convinced, even after his scandalous death, that he was indeed the messiah, the one chosen to initiate a new covenantal relationship between God and Israel and (at least according to one understanding of

what the prophets of Israel had predicted) everyone on earth. They took to the road shortly after the mysterious experience of Jesus's rising, scattered from the center in Jerusalem, traveled alone or in pairs and preached their various understandings of the meaning of what had happened by hanging it all on a story that began a very long time ago, with Abraham. There was no one to control the message as it spread.

These were tumultuous times of conflicting religious and political expectations, and although they met with only mixed success, these early preachers did meet with some, enough so that in the Syrian city of Antioch they began calling themselves "Christians" for the first time—although, as I have said, it is not entirely clear what this name meant to them. It meant at least this much: within a generation or two, some Jews and non-Jews had heard some version of Jesus's story and became convinced that it meant the beginning of a new world, even if what this world entailed was not entirely clear. Among such people, telling the stories of what Jesus had said, of what he had done, and of how he had died became an important part of their own devotional life. Eventually, the stories would be pieced together in a more comprehensive and far more dramatic way.

We can imagine that this all came about quite slowly, so haltingly, in fact, that this first generation of Christian bards and storytellers<sup>1</sup> had no idea of what was eventually to be invented in their names: a gospel. Just as few Greeks ever asked to hear the whole *Iliad* or *Odyssey* narrated at one sitting, few early Christians would have been accustomed to hearing an entire gospel at one sitting. They heard snippets—mysterious sayings,

Zen-like paradoxes, incredible stories of healing power. An astonishing variety of tales about what Jesus said and did were in circulation, with the emphasis, typical of all such storytelling, naturally focused on his pithiest sayings and his most dramatic miracles. These traditions, too, trickled out slowly over time; indeed, it took a very long time, forty years or more, for them to be assembled into a coherent story line by someone who chose a literary genre with which and through which to organize them. I will show this to be Mark's great achievement and hope to demonstrate that the new genre he created, the Christian gospel, was highly influenced by Greek tragedy. But all that lay a generation in the future. What happened immediately after Jesus's scandalous execution is where his followers' story actually began.

## The Rising

Luke tells us the story in a memorable but rather confusing way. Immediately after Jesus's crucifixion, two men are walking together on the road leading out of the city of Jerusalem to a neighboring village called Emmaus (Luke 24:13–49). One of these men seems to be a Jew with a Greek name, Cleopas;<sup>2</sup> the other man is never named. It was not a particularly long journey, roughly seven miles or so. The Romans still used the Greek length of a stade (which was roughly 200 meters, or one length of a Greek athletic *stadium*, hence the name). So when Luke says that they had to walk sixty stades,<sup>3</sup> he is also subtly reminding us that these men are culturally Greek and that they are running,

running away from Jerusalem. Luke tells us that the two had both been followers of Jesus, and now, just two days after his execution, they are leaving town. They are not leaving the city to take a break, and they are clearly not leaving town to begin preaching Jesus's message. Just the opposite, in fact. They have given up entirely. Jesus's mission, on which they had pinned all of their hopes, has ended in failure. His betrayal by a close friend with the help of a cadre of Jerusalem priests and his crucifixion by the Roman civil administration have created a scandal of which these two men wish simply to be free. It's time to go home, time to bind up old wounds, time to begin to forget.

Another man joins them on the way and asks what they are talking about. They respond as gossipy Greeks are wont to do: "Are you the only man in the entire city of Jerusalem who hasn't heard what happened over the past three days?" They mention Jesus of Nazareth, call him "a mighty prophet in word and deed," and then reiterate the scandal of his bitter ending. What they say next is especially haunting, poignant, and lovely. "We had hoped," they begin, "hoped that he was the one to save Israel" (Luke 24:21). Clearly, that hope is finished; after all, these men are leaving. And they are leaving despite the fact that earlier in the morning, several of the women who had accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, all the way from Galilee, had gone to his tomb and found it empty. Everything is a mess; now their friend's tomb may have been desecrated. So these followers of Jesus are leaving, wishing to be free of this whole sad and sordid business.

The stranger berates them. He asks ironically how anyone can be so blind. And then he walks through the Hebrew

scriptures with them, “starting with Moses and working through all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27). The stranger demonstrates that all of these things have happened according to a plan, a plan clearly laid out in the scriptures, one that insists paradoxically that the only path to glory is through suffering (what Luke calls *pathos*).

That is a lot of scripture to work through. By the time the stranger has finished, the group has arrived at the outskirts of Emmaeus. It is getting on toward evening, so Cleopas and his anonymous friend invite the stranger to stay with them. The man agrees. And as soon as they are seated at table together, “their eyes were opened” (Luke 24:31). They recognized the stranger as Jesus himself. And in that same moment, for reasons no one can explain, he vanishes. Only now do they begin talking excitedly with one another, remarking on how “their very heart had burned” when he was talking with them on the way. And so despite the lateness of the hour, they retrace their steps and return to Jerusalem. “We had hoped,” they had remarked sadly, just a few hours earlier. Past tense. Now that hope has been reborn.

The two men return to a different city or at least to a very different circle of friends. Everything is in an uproar. A large group of women had returned to Jesus’s graveside on the morning after the Sabbath; his tomb was empty, and two dazzling angels had informed them that he was no longer there, that he had “risen up,” just as he had predicted he would in Galilee. This is interesting. The Jesus Luke describes in his gospel was always surrounded by women, so much so that some members of his audience were a bit shocked, if not scandalized (not only

Greeks love gossip, after all). Luke tells us who some of these women were by name: Mary of Magdala first; then an otherwise unknown woman named Joanna; then another woman named Mary, who is presumably Jesus's mother;<sup>4</sup> and an anonymous group of others. The women dutifully return to the disciples, the inner circle of Jesus's male followers, and report what they saw and heard at his tomb. No one believes them; we are not told why. Is it because they are women? Is it because the disciples cannot believe that they wouldn't be told first? Or is it that what they have reported, about Jesus' "rising up," is simply too much for them to believe? We don't know yet.

What we do know is that Jesus himself, or an apparition of him, has appeared to two men on the Emmaeus road. By the time these two get back to Jerusalem and rejoin the disciples, Jesus has struck again. Now he has appeared to Simon, the disciple he nicknamed Peter, "the Rock," and everyone has gathered together in a buzz of renewed excitement. The other shoe finally drops. Jesus appears again, to all of them gathered together. And here is the amazing thing: they are still afraid, and they still do not believe their eyes. They are afraid that he is a spirit or a ghost.<sup>5</sup> So Jesus puzzles it out patiently with them. "Look at me," he smiles reassuringly. "Does a spirit have flesh and blood as I do?" He "shows them his hands and feet" (Luke 24:39, though it's not clear what Luke means by that),<sup>6</sup> and still the group doesn't believe him. But the phrases Luke uses now are sympathetic, gracious, and reassuring. Jesus understands that now they doubt "out of joy and wonder" (Luke 24:41). They don't want to believe, they are actually afraid of believing, and so they deny what they are seeing with their own eyes.

So he proves his point by, well, by eating. For some reason, a little fish and bread seals it; they know it is Jesus, in the flesh, before them now. Eating had always been symbolically important to his ministry, according to Luke—what he ate and with whom.

Jesus now reiterates what he said on the road to Emmaeus. He uses the Hebrew scriptures to prove that there is a straight line leading from suffering to repentance (or “change of heart”) to the release from sins. He tells his apostles that he intends for them to “preach”<sup>7</sup> this message to all peoples, beginning right here in Jerusalem. But not right away. Jesus tells them that first they must wait, in Jerusalem, until they are “clothed with a higher power” (Luke 24:49). Then they all walk to the outskirts of the city together, and Jesus disappears again. The elated group returns to the city, devoting each day to the ceaseless praise of God in the Jerusalem Temple.

This is a very strange and mysterious story, once we begin to think about the details. For starters, the nature of Jesus’s resurrection, if that is what it was, is not clear at all. He seems more like a phantasm than a man, and it is interesting that this is the first impression the disciples have when they see him. He goes out of his way to prove his bodiliness to them, goes out of his way to eat and drink in front of them, but then he disappears. In fact, throughout the day, it seemed as if Jesus were more like a live wire: each time he touches the ground, there is an explosion, and he is blown some distance away by the blast. He is buried in Jerusalem. Then he is gone. Next he is walking on the road to Emmaeus. Then he is back in Jerusalem, with Peter. Then he appears to all of his followers together. Then he is gone for good.

## First Questions

There is an important catch in Luke's story: the mystery and confusion about to whom Jesus appears and why. The first people to be alerted to the fact that something astonishing has happened are all women, although Jesus himself does not appear to them; two angels do. Jesus himself first appears to two otherwise nondescript followers, only one of whom is even named. Then and only then does he appear to his dear friend Simon Peter and then at last to the entire group of his closest followers and friends. How were they to interpret this? Is Jesus playing favorites? And if so, why *these* favorites, in *this* order, rather than the people whom he had favored during his lifetime? As we will see, the question of who knew what about Jesus and when they knew it will bear directly on who can claim authority in the life of the community as it tried to form itself in Jesus's absence. Who should be the leader of the community, with Jesus gone? Should it be Peter, of whom Jesus seemed especially fond in life? Should it be Jesus's family, at least two of whom, Mary and James, are right here in Jerusalem? (It is striking that neither his father nor his other brothers are mentioned.) Should it be Mary of Magdala, about whom we know very little in the canonical gospels, but whom Pope Gregory the Great turned into the very paradigm of the penitent whore in a famous homily he delivered in 591 (and whom a modern audience more inclined to sex and romance wants to turn into Jesus's lover and the mother of his children)? Or should it be Paul, who never met Jesus when he was alive but who will shortly receive an important visit (Acts 9:1–19) from this risen

mystery-man himself? It is not just the world which Jesus's rising has turned upside down; his community of closest followers has been totally disrupted as well. Now they must try to pick up the pieces, reassemble their broken following, and come to terms with the lingering scandal of Jesus's execution.

The two men on the road to Emmaeus had hoped that Jesus was the one, and their hope had been shattered. Yet Luke's gospel ends with a deliberately mysterious story of how their hope was restored. How was it restored? What did Cleopas and his friend mean by "save" when they said, "We had hoped that he was the one who would save Israel"?

The answer to that question may be found in the first chapter of Luke's second volume of "Christian" history, the Acts of the Apostles, which purports to be the record of how this first generation of Jesus's followers formed their community in his absence. Apparently, Jesus did not disappear forever on the day he left his followers outside of Jerusalem, near Bethany. Rather—and this idea will recur in many of the non-canonical gospels found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, as we shall see—he appeared periodically to them for the next forty days, discussing the Kingdom of God with his disciples and answering all of their questions. He also insisted that they should wait in Jerusalem, not leaving until they have been rebaptized with "holy spirit," as they had previously been baptized with water. Now we come to the heart of the issue that Luke's story raises; many of the noncanonical gospels raise it as well: given the chance to ask Jesus one last question, what would yours be?

If a modern person were given an opportunity to ask Jesus one question before he departed, I suspect that it would

take the following form. “What happens to us when we die?” “Will I be reunited with my mother, my father, my children, my lover, my friends?” “What did you mean when you said such-and-such?” “Is hell a real place?” or “What does God’s love mean, and is it anything like the love of which I am capable?” Such questions come quite naturally to modern and more literate Christian minds. What is remarkable is that no such questions came to Jesus’s disciples.

No, they speak with one voice, according to Luke; there is only one question on their minds: “Lord, will you now, in this time, restore the Kingdom of Israel?” (Acts 1:6). That, apparently is what they meant by “save.” Saving Israel means restoring the kingdom of David and Solomon, an independent kingdom that presumably could only be restored when they kicked the Romans out. That is the question on their minds; it is a question about politics and history. Only now are we in a position to realize that Jesus, for forty long days, has been telling them about the Kingdom of God, insisting that it is not the same sort of kingdom as Rome’s or Greece’s or Israel’s. Then the mystery deepens. Jesus does not tell them that questions about kingdoms are wrong or that they should stop asking them. He simply refuses to answer. What he says is that God has a timetable for things like that and that their job is different now. They are to wait—all of this interminable waiting in the gospels!—and once “holy spirit” has come to them, then they will preach, “to the very end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This time Jesus really is gone for good. So Peter takes up informal leadership of the community and suggests that they appoint a new apostle named Matthias to replace Judas, the betrayer, who has been killed

in the interim (Acts 1:15–26). And thus ten days after Jesus’s final disappearance (*Pentecost* literally refers to the “fifty days” that have passed since the Passover, in Greek), something called “holy spirit” descends on the apostles in a gust of Jerusalem wind (Acts 2:1–47), and the grand adventure of turning this local Jerusalem sect into a global Greek religion began.

## First Arguments

Several important things come into sharper focus when we read the New Testament with a critical eye aimed at what archaeologists and historians can help us see. They help us see the human fingerprints of these authors and the communities that produced them. Archaeologists have discovered scores of other gospels and gospel fragments, most of them buried in the desert sands and hidden caves of Egypt. These discoveries have dramatically altered our understanding of how religious communities form in the first place.

Such communities are formed, of course, by human beings. And those human beings, predictably enough, argue about what the best form of religious community should be, who should lead it, whether it should have rules, and if so, what kinds of rules and designed by whom. One of the most distinguishing features of the early “Christian” landscape is the way in which these people tried to get away from the language of rules and laws. Something they began calling “the gospel,” they believed, had trumped “the law”—and when they spoke of the Law, they meant the Law of Moses, as found in the

Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Some followers of Jesus seemed to believe that Christianity called for a kind of anarchism or lawlessness (I'll have more to say about these Christian mavericks later on). Others insisted that this new faith required a radicalization of the laws found in the Torah and in the familiar political structure of the Roman Empire. They felt that they had been called to a kind of moral perfection. Still others felt that the language of "law" needed to go but that Jesus followers should still have a "short list" of proper and forbidden behavior. There are sayings and doings of Jesus recorded in the canonical gospels that clearly reflect each of the three positions I have just outlined. In short, many of the early Jesus followers believed that Jesus thought just as they did and that his sayings confirmed what they themselves believed. But the trick is, these same communities began circulating gospels designed to confirm their own beliefs, essentially making Jesus say what they thought he should have said. So far as we know, Jesus himself never wrote a word.

As I emphasized in the Introduction, for all of its focus on *agape*, the unique qualities of reconciling Christian love, the New Testament is actually riddled with conflict, arguments about things that matter by people who believed that they mattered enough to get them exactly right. The New Testament may be a collection of books aiming at love, but its writers argued about the distinguishing features of that love and about who best embodied that love. Followers of Jesus argued about who had authority and what the nature of true religious authority was, as well as about the proper extent of human behavior for which such authority figures were appropriate judges. In short,

religious traditions are often best understood as arguments extended through time about matters of special significance to their practitioners. Traditions are always partly defined by the arguments they have about themselves, and scriptures are often the repositories that record the results of these debates.

One of the reasons that there are so many gospels is that every early community of Jesus followers apparently felt authorized to write one. And what they wrote was an attempt to depict their own understanding of the answers to these absolutely fundamental questions about proper religious authority, right religious rules, and the Christian quality of human life. The fingerprints and other marks left by these conflicts are still visible in the scriptural clay of the New Testament, if we are careful enough to look for them.

We know that the first followers of Jesus argued ferociously with one another about whether Greeks and Romans should be allowed into their communities (Acts 10:1–11:20). We also know that these same Jesus followers argued about whether Greek converts needed to be circumcised or to adopt the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1–35). We know that Paul argued very publicly with Peter over these very questions and essentially called him a hypocrite (Galatians 2:11–16), which was a heavy charge for any follower of Jesus to bear, since Jesus came down especially hard on religious hypocrisy in so many of his Synoptic sayings. We know that Jesus's family, especially his brothers (and maybe his mother), had a sort of authority different from the kind his other followers and friends had.<sup>8</sup> And we also catch the fleeting sense that to some early followers of Jesus, Mary of Magdala was deemed to have an authority that was

altogether unique, given the amount of time she shared with Jesus in private conversation. I'll return to this point as well.

## First Answers

Two enormous questions followed for Jesus's followers after his execution, rising, and the Pentecost. The first was political. What about the Romans? What about the kingdom of Israel? Was it time to rise up in a messianic revolt? The second question was metaphysical. Who was he? Who exactly was Jesus, given how much of what he did and said and what happened to him remains a mystery? Within two generations of Jesus's death and the formation of the first nominally Christian communities, a remarkably creative strategy was developed for answering both of these questions—and for tying them together. A man named Mark invented a new literary genre, one that he called an *evangelion* (Mark 1:1), which we translate into English as a *gospel*. In Mark's gospel, the political and the metaphysical questions are brilliantly combined. In fact, Christian gospels are designed to answer two simple but far-reaching questions: Who was he? and Why did he die that way?

Mark did this fully one generation after Jesus's execution, dramatic rising, and eventual disappearance. With most of the eyewitnesses to these events now dead or dying, Mark preserved the memory of these events in part by inventing a new genre, the Christian gospel, weaving together these traditions about the remarkable sayings and great doings of Jesus into a powerful tragedy that culminated in his Passion, death, and

disappearance. Mark's gospel was also crafted in such a way as to raise a number of questions that Mark's distinctly tragic manner of presentation makes impossible to answer clearly. Jesus was only active for a month; there was never enough time to make things clearer. Furthermore, there were many matters of importance that Jesus did not wish to make clear: the fact of his own messianic status primarily, which he apparently wished to keep secret.<sup>9</sup> He taught in parables in order to confuse matters still further (Mark 4:1–12). And when he finally did speak clearly, no one, not even his disciples, took his point. Small wonder that they all failed him in the end.

Over the course of the next fifteen years (70–85 C.E.), Matthew's and Luke's versions of Mark's tragic gospel endeavored to answer some of the questions that Mark's presentation left most opaque and incomprehensible. They tried to clarify a great deal of what remained unclear in Mark's version of the gospel. Jesus's status as the messiah, or Christ, was clarified and explained more clearly to his followers. Many, if not most, of the parables were explained; new parables were reported that helped illuminate the older ones. And as we will see in the next chapter, the failure of the disciples to stand by Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane had less to do with fate or lack of knowledge and more to do with weakness of the will.

Luke clearly modeled what he did on Mark's gospel, however much he added to it and even changed it along the way; Matthew did much the same thing. That's an important detail to remember. The record of how Jesus's followers came to terms with his rising was written down one or two generations later by men who knew many things that the apostles themselves

could not have known. Here is the crucial point: the people we meet *in* the New Testament *did not have* a New Testament. The only Bible they had was the Hebrew Bible or, rather, a Greek translation of that Bible known as the Septuagint.<sup>10</sup>

What I have laid out in Luke's story of Jesus's rising and its aftermath emphasizes what is most stirring and powerful—and tragic. The fact that God's chosen prophet and Son could have died in such a scandalous way, abandoned even by his own closest followers, and executed like a common criminal by the Romans—that was a hard pill for the disciples to swallow. It still is. The biblical God is supposed to be steadfast, and faith in such a God is supposed to be rewarded. Faith and its rewards—such is the stuff of most Christian sermons even today. And yet, as Paul emphasized in several of his more famous letters, the very heartbeat of Jesus Christ's story is his crucifixion, an event Paul already referred to as a “scandal.”<sup>11</sup> This is a telling detail, because the letters in the New Testament are the oldest “Christian” material we have, written fifteen years or more *before* Mark wrote down his gospel and thus the earliest written evidence we have for what some followers of Jesus said and believed. The point is that the Synoptic gospel writers already knew that the crucifixion was a “scandal.” That is the fundamental Christian truth that John was intent on changing.

So fifteen to twenty years later (90–100 c.e.), with every eyewitness dead, and most likely after Mark's own demise, John chose to compose his own version of events. John, as we will see, had a very different conception of what a gospel ought to be. That is why I refer to his creation as an *evangel*

rather than a gospel. Perhaps John knew the Synoptic gospels; perhaps he did not (scholars have made strong arguments for both possibilities). But this much is certain: John's evangel has a very different chronology than Mark's gospel does, boasting a three-year public ministry. John's Jesus does not teach in parables the way Mark's does, and perhaps the most memorable speech in Matthew's and Luke's gospels, the so-called Sermon on the Mount (or Plain), is also absent. A host of mystifying "I am" sayings takes the place of the Synoptic parables, and most of them would have created an obvious scandal, according to the religious scruples of first-century Judaism. Finally, and this is so important that I will devote the next chapter to it, John's gospel ends with Jesus's mocking rejection of the prayer in Gethsemane and an oddly described, virtually *triumphant* death on a cross.

More than two Christian roads diverged after Jesus's death and rising, to be sure, but these two paths proved to be determinative. Death or new life? Agony or triumph? Benediction or bloodbath—or both? Should we turn to Mark's gospel or John's evangel for wisdom and discernment? Mark's gospel attempted to make *tragic* sense of who Jesus was and how he died. Modern Christian churches have had a very hard time hanging on to the sober form of hope Mark recommends by emphasizing the apparent scandal of Jesus's doubt and divine abandonment. In Mark's hardened but deeply compassionate hands, none of what has happened makes faith impossible, nor is Christian hope disqualified. Rather, for Mark, suffering is simply the marrow of the only story worth telling, a story that really might change the world by altering our perspective

on suffering and pain and compassion. He offers us a *tragic* hope that he believes may be able to withstand the tests of temptation and of time. The way to new life takes us through death—there is no gain without a commensurate loss—and it is only through the loneliness of Gethsemane that Christ came into his Kingdom. All human expectations are turned upside-down. And Mark reminds us that this turnabout is never easy—not for Jesus, not for his disciples, and certainly not for us, who are still attempting to listen to this story. Mark’s gospel insists that it takes a tragedy to inspire the most powerful tragic emotions, like pity, fear, and compassion. The heart of this tragic gospel is Jesus’s agonized prayer in Gethsemane, his desire to avoid this kind of death. The irony of later Christian history is that when John rejected tragedy as a genre, and the description of Gethsemane as a prayer garden, and pity as an emotion compatible with salvation, then he unwittingly cut the heart out of Christian compassion. All that was left was fear.