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RESURRECTION AND THE REIGN OF GOD ¹

The fifth Frederick Neumann Symposium has for its theme "Hope for the Kingdom and Responsibility for the World." We are thus obliged to explore once again a nexus of issues which has already been considered many times over, and in a variety of forms. But in asking anew: What is the connection between hope for the reign of God and responsibility for this world?, we are supposed to take our orientation primarily from Mark 13, Romans 8 and Revelation 20 and 21. That is the hitch. Or should we say, that is the particular challenge?

Precisely the given texts make it very difficult to connect the events depicted in them with perspectives which can be put brought to bear in a way which is convincing and provides orientation in our world. All three texts focus on something beyond all experience: the rocking of the powers of heaven and the coming of the Human One in clouds with great power and glory (Mk 13); the revelation of the children of God, which goes hand in hand with the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8); the new heavens and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, which is illumined only by the glory of God and of the Lamb (Rv 20 and 21).

What does the concentration on this "beyond" of all experience have to do with responsibility for the world? Indeed, how can these texts even be brought into relation with the hope for God's reign? Jesus' statements and parables insist that God's reign is already coming. They insist that, although God's reign may be hidden to many, although it may be present only in an emergent manner, it is present, like salt, light, leaven and good seed.² Does Jesus perhaps lead us astray in saying that? Should this hope-bearing proclamation of a reign which is already coming be given up in favor of a purely future reality which brings itself to bear in a negation and annihilation of this world? How can we bring our theme and our texts together? It looks as if we are invited to attempt a theological squaring of the circle.

The task posed by this symposium also confronts us with, in the words of Daniel Migliore, a

1 I am very grateful for helpful comments on this paper by Daniel Migliore and Klaus Berger.
2 See M. Welker, "The 'Reign' of God," *Theology Today* (1992): 500-515.

"theological vacuum that is now being filled by fundamentalistic apocalypticism." Migliore has traced this vacuum back to "the failure of the dominant theologies in North America (and I would add: and in Europe), too domesticated and too complacent to take seriously the disturbing eschatological themes of the Bible."³ How can we take seriously the "disturbing eschatological themes" of Mark 13, Romans 8 and Revelation 20 and 21? How can we do this without abandoning hope for the reign of God and without losing sight of responsibility for the world?

The response which I would like to contribute in the following discussion proceeds from yet another "disturbing eschatological theme": the resurrection. Taking as my point of departure the accounts of Jesus' resurrection, I want to attempt to elucidate and to understand that reality which ties together realistic hope for God's reign and the eschatological perspectives on a radical transformation of the world.

I. The Resurrection as Palpable Reality and as Appearance

How can we comprehend God's eschatological action and God's eschatological self-demonstration? How can we understand the power which is at work in the coming reign of God? The answer of many classic theologies is that we must stick to the revelation of God in the crucified and risen Christ.⁴ Yet God's demonstration of power in the resurrection of the crucified Christ likewise confronts the search for theological understanding with major difficulties. Under the conditions of the current consciousness of reality, these difficulties seem to be simply insuperable. For we are confronted with the particular bodiliness of the resurrected Christ. Does not this confrontation bring understanding to the end of its rope?

The bodiliness of the risen Christ can not consist in the crucified Jesus simply being revived, simply coming back to life. The witnesses to the resurrection are concerned to highlight the palpability of the presence of the risen Christ. Yet remarkably they also emphasize that the resurrection has the character of appearance. Why? How are we to understand the reality of the risen crucified Jesus Christ? Why is this reality evidently not

3 D.L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 235.

4 See e.g. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, new ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 84ff., 139ff.

exhausted either in a revived fleshly existence or in mere conceptions, testimonies and visions of human beings in the time from the return of the disciples to Galilee until Jesus' appearance to Paul--approximately three years after Jesus' death?

Wolfhart Pannenberg's formulation in the second volume of his Systematic Theology is on the mark: "The resurrection of Jesus was thus not a return into this earthly life, but a transition into the new, eschatological life. He is the 'first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (I Cor 15:20), the 'firstborn within a large family' (Rom 8:29), the 'firstborn from the dead' (Col 1:18; Rv 1:5), the 'author of life' (Acts 3:15)."⁵ Yet seen under this aspect--that what is at hand here is a transition into the new, eschatological life--how is the facticity of the resurrection event to be judged?⁶ What genuineness and dependability are we to attribute to the witnesses to the resurrection? How does this reality relate to the reality of our experience? What is the connection between the witness borne to the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and the resurrection of the witnesses?

In order to comprehend whether and how God's eschatological action exercises an effect through the resurrection in the reality of our lives, according to the Biblical texts we must wrestle with the difficult interconnection between the reality and the appearance of the risen Christ. In doing so we must abandon simplistic, reductive conceptions of reality which have obscured the resurrection.

The accounts of the risen Jesus Christ are consciously and emphatically accounts of Christ's appearance. They are consciously and emphatically accounts of the risen Christ's coming on the scene in a way that is scarcely believable and highly improbable, and which remains dubious on the grounds of all other experience. They are consciously and emphatically accounts which continually raise the question of truth and problems of certainty. Clearly they consciously and emphatically provoke again and again the question: Were those persons who perceived the risen Christ caught up in mere notions, and fantastic notions at that?⁷ The

5 W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1991), 390.

6 A reflection of the aporias offers J. Galvin in: *Systematic Theology. Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. F. Schüssler Fiorenza and J.P. Galvin, Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1991, 297ff.

7 For critical engagement with the so-called subjective vision hypothesis, see U. Wilckens, first in "Die Überlieferungsgeschichte der Auferstehung Jesu," in F. Vierung, ed., *Die Bedeutung der Auferstehungsbotschaft für den Glauben an Jesus Christus* (Gütersloh: 1966), 51. Concerning the supposition that what was involved was an objective, intersubjectively coordinated vision, a "psychic chain reaction," see B. Klappert, *Diskussion um Kreuz und Auferstehung*, 5th ed. (Wuppertal: Aussaat, 1981), 12. Klappert is picking up on H. Graß, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: 1962).

accounts of the resurrection provoke such questions, although at the same time they counteract the suspicion of illusion by highlighting the palpable contact with the risen Christ. Evidently they very consciously maintain the tension between, on the one hand, the suspicion of illusion and, on the other hand, the invalidation of that suspicion.

Mt 28:9 says that the women who came to the grave took hold of the feet of the risen Christ. The women are running from the empty tomb in fear and great joy in order to announce to the disciples the message of the angel. When Jesus meets them, they fall down and take hold of his feet.

Lk 24:30 records that Jesus lies at table with the Emmaus disciples and breaks bread with and for them. Lk 24:39 and Jn 20:27 report Jesus' invitation to the disciples to touch him, and his invitation to Thomas to touch his wounds. Lk 24:41-43 even says, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence."

It is astounding that in spite of this emphasis upon the fact that the presence of the risen Christ is palpable in the extreme (touching, breaking bread, eating), the Synoptic writers and John give many indications that the risen Christ is and remains an appearance. There is not a single place where the accounts of the risen Jesus Christ support the impression that the risen Christ lived again with his disciples or with other human beings in a real and continuous manner, that the risen Christ continued his pre-Easter life with them. Not a single text suggests the claim that the risen Christ lived with his fellow human beings in precisely the same way as did Jesus of Nazareth before his crucifixion.

In Mk 16:12 we find the significant expression: "he appeared" and "he appeared in another form." Mk 16:14 speaks of an appearance to the eleven disciples lying at table. The text emphasizes the surprising and unmediated quality of this event. Mk 16:11 and 16:13 are right in line with this emphasis upon improbability when they explicitly repeat that the first witnesses to the presence of the risen Christ did not believe.

Admittedly, Mt 18:17 records that the disciples who saw the risen Christ fell to their knees before him. But then the text says, "But some doubted." Klaus Berger has provided a convincing commentary on this verse:

It is striking that the doubt follows the act of falling to their knees (contrary to, say, Lk 24:37, 52!). Previous interpreters have not given attention to this remarkable circumstance. Its explanation is that the act of falling to the knees plays a particular role in appearances. According to a well-established tradition . . . it is a characteristic of God's messenger to renounce this act of people falling on their knees and to refuse to accept it. Satan strives to have people fall on their knees, although this act is not appropriate before Satan (Mt 4:9). The acceptance, without a word of objection, of people's falling to their knees is thus an occasion for doubt. The content of the doubt is . . . the alternative between "divine messenger" and "evil spirit." We can see from the texts of the tradition that the only case in which the act of falling to the knees need not be refused is when the one who is addressed can rightly lay claim to the title "Dominus" or "Kyrios," and does not reject this title. When Jesus accepts the disciples' act of falling to their knees before him, he thus is either Kyrios or Satan.⁸

Still more revealing is the way in which Luke records this tension between, on the one hand, palpable recognition and, on the other hand, an appearance accompanied by doubt, indeed even by dread. Lk 24:16 initially says of the Emmaus disciples, whom Jesus joins and with whom he travels on their way, that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Then--highlighting in the most dramatic way of all the simultaneous recognition and withdrawal of the resurrected Christ--Lk 24:31 reports that after Jesus broke bread the disciples' eyes are indeed opened and they recognize him. But in their very act of recognizing Jesus "he vanished from their sight." When the Emmaus disciples tell the other disciples about their experience, the next appearance occurs. Lk 24:36-37 reports: "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." Here, too, the risen Christ's act of making himself palpably present is accompanied by doubt in Christ's real presence.

If anything, John underlines the appearance character of the risen Christ still more strongly than do the Synoptic writers. According to Jn 20:17, when Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Christ, he addresses her with the words, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet

8 K. Berger, *Die Auferstehung des Propheten und die Erhöhung des Menschensohnes: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Deutung des Geschickes Jesu in frühchristlichen Texten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1976), 162-163.

ascended to the Father." Jn 20:19 and 26 emphasize that Jesus comes and stands among the disciples "when the doors were shut." In a drastic way the text counteracts the impression that the old fleshliness has been restored, that here a life is being continued which was merely interrupted, that the resurrection is simply a reentry into the life lived before death.

It is very important to the texts to emphasize that the presence of the risen Christ has a palpable quality, that Christ is truly and bodily risen. Yet it is equally undeniable that at the same time they insist that what is at issue are appearances, burdened with all the problems of certainty which accompany an appearance, since it can be confused with mere notions, imagined experiences and fantasies.

If we want to attempt to understand what is going on in the resurrection and in God's eschatological action, it is essential that we preserve and endure this tension. The witnesses to the resurrection evidently want to describe an event which exhibits features of that which is natural, palpable and empirical, but which is not exhausted by that which is natural, palpable and empirical. They want to describe an event which, for good and indispensable reasons, is broader and more complex than physical reality. The risen Christ is encountered in various appearances, comes and stands immediately among the disciples even when the doors are shut. Yet the risen Christ stands in a relation of identity with his natural, earthly, physical existence. The risen Christ appears and then vanishes like an angel. But unlike an angel, the risen Christ stands in a relation of identity with a natural and historical existence. The risen Christ has gone through a real human life and bears its features on himself in an enduring way.⁹

What is at issue is an appearance which we can say is "grounded in reality." At the same time the life of the risen Christ is now lived in self-revelation to other human beings. That life is carried out in comforting them, in strengthening them, and in sending them forth. What is at issue is thus an appearance which we can say "grounds reality," because the appearance brings itself to bear as the strengthening, gathering, commissioning, calling and sending of human beings.

9 I have shown elsewhere that the angels must be appearances in order not to mask the fullness of God's glory, and that they are more like cultural than natural creatures. See "Angels in the Bible: A Grand Logic and the Big Problem of Their Hypercomplex Reality" *Theology Today* (forthcoming, 1994).

The recognition that the risen Christ on earth is an appearance is of great importance for many reasons. The fear is totally unfounded that seeing the risen Christ in this way would not do justice to the historicity, the reality and the power of the resurrection and of the message of the resurrection. The opposite is the case. Not merely for the sake of being true to experience and for the sake of intellectual honesty, not only for the sake of agreement with the Biblical witnesses, but for the sake of the subject matter it is essential to recognize and to insist that on earth the risen Christ is an appearance. Only in that way does a clear understanding of two fundamental matters become possible.

II. The Resurrection and Attestation of the Exalted Christ

The risen Christ is necessarily perceived on earth as an appearance because he belongs to a reality and creates a reality which is richer and more complex than natural earthly reality. In comparison with the reality to which the risen Christ belongs and which he creates, earthly life represents a reduction. Inasmuch as the risen Christ makes himself present or is made present as an appearance, he is not bound to one spatial location at a time and to the conditions of natural earthly existence. Mark says that the risen Christ reveals himself in different forms. The risen Christ comes and stands among the disciples whether the doors are shut or not. Inasmuch as the risen Christ is remembered and made present with his scars and the marks of the nails, inasmuch as the risen Christ is now clearly seen in the connection between the resurrection and his advance announcements of his passion, inasmuch as the risen Christ thus appears in light of the Messianic promises, the risen Christ's identity asserts itself against arbitrary distortions and obstructions. In the risen Christ's appearing, a definite space of memory and expectation is opened in which the risen Christ can be recognized in an appropriate and truly living way. As with angels, the risen Christ's appearing and vanishing brings to expression the fact that every merely palpable perception would be inadequate to this complex reality.

The notion of the exaltation of the risen Christ clarifies the positive side of that which is expressed in an apparently negative way by the risen Christ's appearance. On the basis of a one-sidedly naturalistic understanding of heaven, the exaltation of Christ and the complex

reality connected with it have often been incorrectly understood.¹⁰ The exaltation of Christ expresses the fact that Christ enters into a domain in which those natural and social powers are gathered and held co-present which we experience under earthly conditions in only an isolated, point by point, reductive manner. Heaven overarches all our worlds of experience, our more or less extended conceptions of the world and of reality. Heaven holds both past and future times and cultures. It is that domain of reality which is relatively inaccessible to us, which we certainly can not manipulate, but which decisively defines life on this earth. According to the conviction of the Biblical traditions, powers of nature, powers of social spheres, powers of history, powers of the past and of the future are gathered in heaven. The risen Christ is taken into this reality and thus is no longer subject to the limitations and boundaries, the one-sidednesses and frailties of a specific, relative world, a specific time, and a specific culture.

Here we are dealing with an understanding of reality which is hypercomplex for us, but which is neither nonsensical nor fantastic. We render this understanding of reality thematic in the doxologies: "...as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end!" Or in the words of Heb 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever!" Realities which are measurable only in natural terms do not attain this scope and power made known in the appearance of the risen Christ. But this power is reflected by events which have become "historical" in the strict sense.¹¹ The resurrection is a historical event. This means that the resurrection is an event which, without giving up its connection to the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, influences a diversity of realities: providing orientation, causing change, moving reality, intensifying reality, interweaving reality. We have before us not only a promise, but a powerful fulfillment; not only a basis for hope, but a reason for faith; not only a reference to an open future, but to a fulfilled past and present.

Yet the emphasis on the appearance of the risen Christ not only respects the fact that the

10 In various places I have engaged in a critical analysis of this one-sidedly naturalistic understanding. See *Universalität Gottes und Relativität der Welt: Theologische Kosmologie im Dialog mit dem amerikanischen Prozeßdenken nach Whitehead*, 2d ed. (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1988); "Himmel," *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 2, 3d ed. (1988), 519-522; *Gottes Geist: Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*, 2d ed. (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1993), 132ff. (English: *God the Spirit* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming, 1994]).

11 On the difference between "historical" events and those which are measurable only in empirical terms, see my critical analysis of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "'Unity of Religious History' and 'Universal Self-Consciousness': Leading Concepts or Mere Horizons on the Way 'Towards a World Theology'?", *Harvard Theological Review* 81:4 (1988): 431ff.

earthly perceptions of heavenly reality can not exhaust the latter. It also expresses the fact that human beings, the witnesses, have an essential part in this event. An appearance is essentially a "being for others." The appearance is not self-possessed. It is not self-sufficient. The perspectives on it--the fact that it is perceived and the way in which it is perceived--help to constitute it. Thus doubt and uncertainty always accompany and surround appearances. We must not suppress this aspect, including with regard to the risen Christ. In any case the Gospels do not suppress this problem. They confront us with it at length. The fact that the witnesses help to constitute the appearance, the fact that the risen Christ appears essentially "for them" and not for himself, self-possessed and self-absorbed--this fact does not mean that the testimonies to the resurrection rest on arbitrary conceptions or bare illusions. The testimonies refer to the past and to the promised reality of Jesus of Nazareth, which becomes present reality in a new way for the witnesses.

The resurrection appearances link up with real, palpable experience and give rise to real, palpable experiences. They engage us more deeply and more powerfully than merely natural events can affect and engage us.¹² This palpable change in human beings who are confronted with the appearance of the risen Christ is documented by the fact that the risen Christ calls, commissions and sends. In this extremely concrete, disputed and disputable way, "God's being is in coming," to use a formulation much beloved in recent German-language theology.¹³ At the same time the resurrection appearances qua appearances compel an understanding which the Reformers tried to drive home: there is no Jesus Christ without the people of Jesus Christ. There is no Jesus Christ without the witnesses of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The pouring of the Spirit and the edification of Christ's body increase this inclusion and involvement of human beings in Christ's presence after easter.

The reality of the resurrection--a reality which manifests itself in appearance, in testimony

12 We give expression to this in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There are many reasons to think that, on the basis of the insights developed in this paper, we will be able to better understand the particular "realism" of that sacrament.

13 Above all in the work of Eberhard Jüngel: e.g., *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 566: "God's being is in coming"; "God's being remains in coming"; etc. Despite his effort to develop the theology of the Trinity and the theology of the cross in strict relationship with one another, Jüngel is continually in danger of having his theology issue in metaphysical speculations à la Hegel concerning a complex self-relation of God.

14 This insight also acquires increasing importance in the later Barth. In his *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, esp. 353ff. and IV/3, 326ff., Barth holds with systematic consistency to the point that "Christ would not be Christ without Christ's own people (in the narrower and wider senses of the term), that there cannot, therefore, be an exclusive but only an inclusive Christology which encompasses the existence of human beings both negatively and positively" (IV/1, 354, translation altered).

and in proclamation in the power of the Spirit--is continually endangered on the basis of its ties to the witnesses, resp. to the members of Christ's body. Yet inasmuch as it simultaneously enters into numerous contexts in time and space, it is extremely powerful. The presence of the risen Christ connects structural patterns of life and experience which are separated in time and space. This broad reality, this reality which overarches the domain of individual or shared possible experience, is grasped by faith. Faith relates to a reality which does not merely enter into, and exercise an effect in, one domain of knowledge and experience.

It becomes possible to recognize the significance and the seriousness of this community of the witnesses to the risen Christ as soon as we see that Christ' resurrection represents God's engagement with the event of the cross. The witnesses to the resurrection and the members of Christ's body are taken into and implicated in a process in which God engages the conspiracy of human beings against life.

This conspiracy is very complex. It employs all available means of power in order to silence and to bring about the disappearance of the one who proclaimed God's coming reign and who brought very concrete deliverance from sickness and need to many human beings--deliverance which could be palpably experienced. In the name of religion, in the name of Jewish and Roman law, in the name of the dominant politics and the public opinion of the moment, Jesus of Nazareth is nailed to the cross. The powers which are supposed to serve to maintain a life which is good, pleasing to God and beneficent to human beings, here--being misused--collaborate against the bearer of the power of life.¹⁵ God's eschatological action not only uncovers this conspiracy. It not only sentences this conspiracy to ineffectiveness. It compels this conspiracy, against this conspiracy's own intentions, to work towards and serve the exaltation of Christ and the powerful coming of God's reign. The "will to distance from God" (H.-G. Geyer), which human beings seem to help triumph through the cross, is put to use by God to reveal the world's sin and lostness. Out of the apparently definitive absence of

15 In a major article on "Problems of Jesus' Trial," Otto Betz has provided a differentiated exposition of this religious and political collaboration, while at the same time attempting to avoid moral denunciations on all sides. On the basis of Mt 26:63 ("Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath [exorkizo] before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'"), Betz considers whether the priests may even have made an effort to save Jesus and to dissuade him from his Messianic claim. Pilate, too, according to Betz merely stuck to the Lex Julia de majestate (Digesten 48:4, 1): "According to that law the claim to be king was condemned as a crime deserving death, insofar as it...caused rebellion" ("Probleme des Prozesses Jesu," in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. 2 [Berlin: 1982], 565ff., 642). In developing this line of thought Betz is picking up on Chaim Cohn, *Reflections on the Trial and Death of Jesus* (Jerusalem: 1967).

help and salvation, out of the abyss of despair and cynicism grows the power of the world's deliverance.

In the resurrection God engages the powers which, under the semblance of protecting and helping us, both knowingly and unknowingly lead us to destruction. What is at issue is nothing less than God's great engagement with sin. The witnesses to the resurrection and the members of Christ's body are deemed worthy to participate in this engagement. In the power of the Spirit they enter into the engagement with destructive, sinful misuse of the law in order that, as Rom 8 says, "the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk . . . according to the Spirit."

In the power of the Spirit the community of the witnesses to the resurrection is set in creative motion. The talk of the pouring out of the Spirit graphically describes this community out of all countries, cultures and languages. It describes a community in which men and women, old and young, rulers and ruled mediate prophetic knowledge of God and realize righteousness and mercy both with each other and for each other.¹⁶ On the one hand, this life in the Spirit is continually engaged with the powers which execute the will to distance from God, to unrighteousness and to lack of mercy. On the other hand, this life in the Spirit lives in the certainty of having a share in the power "from on high." It thus lives in the certainty formulated by Rom 8:36b-39 in the following manner:

"For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. But we overcome all these things through the one who loved us. For I am certain that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

III. The Message of the "Disturbing Texts" of Mk 13, Rom 8 and Rv 20-21

But when and where does a universally obvious experience correspond to this certainty of faith? When and where does this certainty of life in the Spirit, the certainty of life in the

¹⁶ See in greater detail M. Welker, *God the Spirit*, parts 2.4 and 4.1.

community of testimony with the risen and exalted Christ--when and where does this certainty become a universally obvious truth?

Our three "disturbing" eschatological texts respond to this question. Having elucidated the background of the community of the resurrection, we can, I think, understand why the response which these texts give must be troubling and dismaying. They must envision a situation in which the truth of the resurrection becomes manifest to really all witnesses: nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. In an unimaginable universality it is to become manifest that the witnesses, those who live in the Spirit, the children of God, live a valid life which overcomes death, as the crucified Christ overcame it in the resurrection. This valid life is not yet grasped in its fullness when we know that we are secure and protected in the community of the church. It is not yet grasped in its fullness when we understand ourselves as members of an earthly community of testimony which permeates the world and transforms it with God's good gifts. The earthly chain of communities of witnesses will one day break off, just as Lazarus had to die again.¹⁷

What happens when that which is valid and enduring, that which has overcome and overcomes death, is lifted up out of this community of witnesses with the risen Christ? The answer is that we are then compelled to develop a new understanding of reality and a new understanding of time--an understanding which bursts the boundaries of the mere universality of this world. We must hold simultaneously present the resurrection community of all times and regions of the world, the valid and creative life of all times and of all regions of the world. But that bursts the boundaries of our conceptions of reality and of world. In the power of the Spirit we can imagine the presence of the risen Christ on earth. But we can not grasp the fullness of the reality of the exalted Christ, the exalted Christ's obvious presence with all witnesses, without at the same time focusing on the end of this world.

Our three texts do precisely that, from three different perspectives. Romans 8 talks about the hope that with the redemption of our bodies we become manifest as children of God, so that creation is liberated from the pains of transitoriness (Rom-8:19ff.). The revelation of the valid life which is at work in the testimony to the resurrection, in the activity of the Spirit, in the

17 See the excellent article by the philosopher Konrad Cramer, "Über Leben und Glauben, Zeit und Tod: Philosophische Überlegungen zur christlichen Religion," in U. Barth and W. Gräß, eds., *Gott im Selbstbewußtsein der Moderne: Zum neuzeitlichen Begriff der Religion* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 129ff.

engagement with sin on behalf of true knowledge of God, true righteousness and mercy--the unbounded revelation of this life dissolves the boundaries of finitude and of transitoriness.

Mark 13 describes this process primarily concentrated not on those who believe, but on the unbounded revelation of the exalted Christ. Only by removing earthly reality can the Human One, the representative of the human species in the fullness of heavenly reality, enter into earthly relations with really all the people of the Human One. That removal of earthly reality must be experienced as a catastrophe of cosmic proportions, as a dramatic sharpening of conflicts with a world which wants to cling to itself and to its finite constitution. For that reason human beings--thoroughly despairing--will attempt to pin the Messiah down in that which is finite: "And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'--do not believe it" (Mk·13:21). In contrast to every fixed concentration in that which is finite, the Human One will gather all the elect of all times and worlds. The Human One will gather the elect not only from one end of the earth to the other, but, as the text says, "from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mk 13:27).

The Apocalypse describes this process in an orientation which we can term "historico-cosmological." Earth and heaven flee from God's presence (Rv 20:11). The sea gives up the dead that are in it, and death and the underworld give up the dead that are in them (cf. Rv 20:13). Here as well we have before us images of a gathering of human beings from the fullness of times. Such a gathering must go hand in hand with the removal of all familiar earthly conditions of existence. This reality is filled with the glory of God and of the Lamb (Rv 21:23; cf. 21:9-11). It can no longer be described except in symbolic transformations of our notions of reality.

Are these three text only terrifying and discouraging? Do they ultimately communicate the message that whoever wants to achieve, under the conditions of the finite, a definitive awareness of the unbounded fullness of God's glory, must not be surprised when that which is finite collapses in the process? Or do these texts paint images of revenge and recompense which stir up the flames of the escapist hope that one day the witnesses to the resurrection will be definitively lifted out of this miserable world?

In my opinion these texts attempt to enunciate the hope ignited by Jesus' overcoming of the world, the hope ignited by Jesus' suffering, Jesus' dying on the cross and Jesus' resurrection.

These texts attempt to extend this hope to all overcoming of the world. In spite of all experiences of death and despair, they attempt to bear witness to the hope for all elected human beings to participate in the life of the resurrection. In a healing way they break through all egoism of the witnesses living at any particular time. They do this by also including in this community the times and the worlds before and after these witnesses. On the one hand, in so doing they give the comfort of including every death of witnesses to the resurrection and on those, who live in the Spirit. They provide a perspective which allows us to look back at our own deaths. On the other hand, in so doing they compel us to focus on the end of this world. Comfort and terror can not be separated here. Judgment and deliverance are intertwined. But this situation is thoroughly familiar to those who believe.

As witnesses to the resurrection and as members of Christ's body, those who believe come from the perspective of God's engagement with the destructive power of sin and of death. As witnesses to the resurrection and as members of Christ's body they are enlisted in the service of this engagement. In this engagement they can acquire a certainty of community with the risen Christ, with the exalted Human One. They can acquire a consciousness of participating in the glory of the exalted Lamb. In this certainty and in this consciousness they can very calmly take cognizance of the apocalyptic histories and visions. The full revelation of the communion of saints "from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" is inconceivable without this earth and its heaven passing away. Whoever is already now taking part as a witness in the life of the risen Christ will need neither to long impatiently for this definitive revelation nor to fear it.

The witnesses to the resurrection and those who live in the Spirit of Christ are already living in the alertness of which Mk 13 speaks. They are living in the community of the Spirit--a community which, according to Rom 8, is inviolable. They are living in the light of the glory of the Lamb depicted by the Apocalypse. At the same time they are living in and among diverse trials, temptations and threats. They are hounded not only by ridicule and cynicism, not only by the power of real godlessness and of diverse forms of unrighteousness, but also by the dangers of their own uncertainty, of their own capacity to be deceived, and of their own trials and temptations. Under the conditions of earthly existence, the resurrection is present only in this tension and can be experienced only in this tension. In that regard we have no advantage over the first witnesses--and they have none over us.