

Appendix A

A World Without an Easter

Mara, a young woman with a bitter, sorrowful, washed-out look, is walking through the snow on a city street, carrying a small evergreen tree. She accidentally bumps into Rabbi Nathan, since both are looking down, sheltering their faces from the winter wind. Rabbi Nathan is old but sprightly, and wears a yarmulke.

Mara: Oh, excuse me, sir. I didn't mean to bump into you. Are you all right?

Rabbi Nathan: Oh, quite all right, thank you, child. It's no wonder you didn't see me. How can you see from behind that tree you're carrying? What in the world are you doing with *that*? It looks awfully heavy for a woman to carry. Would you like some help? Here, let my slave carry it for you.

M (surprised): Oh . . . why, thank you, kind sir.

RN: You're carrying that all by yourself. Where is *your* slave?

M: Oh, we're too poor to have any.

RN: Not even one slave? Oh, you poor woman. How can you get anything done without good slaves?

M: Oh, we manage. But I don't understand—why do you go out of your way to help me? What am I to you?

RN: A stranger in need.

M: That's a most remarkable thing to say in this dog-eat-dog world. Are you—are you a Christian by any chance?

RN: No, I'm a Jew. A rabbi, in fact.

M: Oooh. I don't think I've ever met one of you before. How many of you are left in New Rome?

RN: Since the last pogrom, about six thousand. But we are destined to last until the end of time, you know.

M: I know. You are the True God's Chosen People.

RN: You are one of the few that knows us. What was that sect that you thought I was part of?

M: Christians. I thought you were a Christian.

RN: Are *you* a Christian?

M: Yes.

RN: I think I have never met a Christian before. I remember reading about you people long ago in some old history book. You consider yourself some sort of Jewish sect, don't you?

M: In a way. We believe your scriptures, but we also believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the promised one. We call him the "Christ," the anointed one.

RN: And how many of *you* are there left in New Rome?

M: Not many.

RN: And elsewhere in the world?

M: None, I think.

RN: There are a few Jews in almost every country in the world. We're still the world's troublemakers. Everybody hates us. We're the world's troubled conscience.

M: I know. The world doesn't hate us much, I think. They've just forgot-

ten us, because they have forgotten him.

RN: Who?

M: Jesus.

RN: The man you say was the Messiah?

M: Yes. We still keep his memory. This tree, here, that I was carrying—that's for a festival we celebrate each year, the festival of his birth. We call it "Christmas." We decorate trees with lights and we give gifts to each other.

RN: How quaint! I never heard of that before. It sounds a little like our feast of Hannukah. Say . . . I wonder if you have a few minutes free to talk to an old man about things I don't know. I'm always eager to learn about strange new customs and beliefs.

M: All right. What do you want to know?

RN: *Why* do you keep his memory?

M: Because memory is a precious thing.

RN: Oh, I know that, all right. But why do you single him out and call him the Messiah? Wasn't he crucified as a criminal about two thousand years ago?

M: So the old stories say. But who knows what happened, really? Some of us hope that he somehow escaped death. There are strange rumors . . .

RN: Where is he now, then, if he escaped death?

M: Nobody knows. The few records we have are uncertain. They're just paper, after all. And there is no one alive with the authority to say what really happened.

RN: So you don't have divinely authorized scriptures like ours? Detailed eyewitness accounts of great prophets like Abraham and Moses and David?

M: No.

RN: I suppose you wouldn't have scriptures about him if he ended his life

as a condemned criminal. But how then can you say he was the Messiah?

M: He said so himself.

RN: Why do you believe him?

M: Because we believe he was the wisest man who ever lived.

RN: And why do you believe that?

M: Because of the teachings we have from him.

RN: Where are these teachings to be found?

M: They were passed down by word of mouth and written down generations later.

RN: Oh, I think I remember now. He preached a great sermon, didn't he? You call it the "Sermon on the Mount," don't you?

M: Yes.

RN: Those are some very beautiful sayings. But didn't this Jesus also predict that he would rise from the dead? Or am I confusing him with some other forgotten old myth?

M: Yes, he did predict that.

RN: It must have been quite a disappointment to his followers when he didn't do what he predicted.

M: Oh, but we believe that he really did rise from the dead, in the only really important sense.

RN: Really, you mean? Literally? Bodily?

M: No, spiritually. He rose from the dead in our hearts. We celebrate the feast of his resurrection too. We call it Easter.

RN: What do you do on Easter?

M: We have chicks and bunnies and eggs, as symbols of new life.

RN: Why do you celebrate a resurrection feast for Jesus if Jesus didn't really rise?

M: What rose from the dead was Easter faith.

RN: Faith in what? How can there be Easter faith unless Easter really happened?

M: It was our mistake to take his prediction literally, of course. But it was still a profound symbol. The rising really happened, but not in a stone tomb. It happened in us: in our hearts and minds and lives.

RN: I'm sorry to say this—I know it must sound cynical to you but that sounds like the pagan nonsense we Jews rejected many, many centuries ago. The pagans had corn gods and vegetation gods aplenty, you know—they still do—and if you ask them when these gods lived, the answer is always something like yours. They say the god rises from the dead every year when the earth awakens in the spring, or when their hearts celebrate the feast of spring. You see, that's what's so different about us, about Jews: we know the real deeds of God in the world, in history. We don't believe in vague, abstract, spiritual symbols of ourselves or our world; we believe in the real God who acted in history. He performed miracles. They were visible. If your Jesus doesn't fit that pattern, you can't claim that you are any kind of offshoot of Judaism.

If your Jesus had really risen from the grave, now, you would have had a real event to remember instead of just another vague pagan symbol. But I should be listening to you instead of talking. I'm here to learn, not to lecture. I'm not trying to argue you out of your religion or into mine.

M: Why not, if you believe yours is true?

RN: Because we Jews are not meant to proselytize, to convert the world, until the true Messiah comes. When that happens, then the whole world will learn of the true God, and the people that lived in darkness will see a great light, and the knowledge of God will extend from sea to sea.

M: We believe that Jesus was that Messiah.

RN: How did he show the world the true God?

M: He called God his Father. He said strange things like "I and the Father are one" and "He who has seen me, has seen the Father."

RN: That sounds blasphemous. Isn't that why he was crucified?

M: Well, we don't really know how to interpret those mysterious sayings of his. Each of us is free to make up our own mind. We are not bound by any authoritative scripture or church.

RN: Your words sound like praise, but your tone sounds like blame. I wonder whether you are bragging or complaining.

M: You're right, Rabbi. You see into my heart. I wish we *did* have some sure teaching authority. It all seems so uncertain, so wispy. Yet there's something wonderful and unforgettable about that man, something . . . something that seems on the verge of *breaking through*, but not quite, if you know what I mean. It's hard to explain. There seems to be something about the stories about him, even if they're only myths, that sets him apart from every other man in history. For instance, no one has ever succeeded in writing convincing fiction about him. Isn't that remarkable? There are legends that say he really performed miracles.

RN: If he really performed miracles, why didn't he perform the big one and rise from the dead?

M: I told you, he rises every time we remember him.

RN: Pious gobbledygook! If he didn't really rise from the dead, you can't raise him by remembering what didn't happen!

M: But isn't *your* tradition full of legends of miracles too? The stories about Moses, for instance . . .

RN: They're not legends. They're history. They really happened.

M: Then why did they stop happening? Why haven't there been miracles happening for the last two thousand years either for Jews or for Christians? Why the power shortage?

RN: That's a very good question. There does seem to have been a power shortage. Different rabbis give different answers to that question, but frankly, none of them has ever quite satisfied me. I just don't know.

M: I don't think miracles ever did happen, even in the past.

RN: You sound bitter when you say that.

M: I guess I am. I wish very hard that miracles really happened. And I wish even harder that God would do some of them today. If the stories about Jesus casting out demons were true, and if Jesus had really risen from the dead, then he could do the same thing today. And that would take care of those Satanists who are taking over the world.

RN: Hush, child! The walls have ears. The Satanists are everywhere nowadays. And we are the two groups they hate the most. Yes, I feel as you do: if only we had the kind of power the Satanists have . . . We have no protection from them.

M: The laws protect us from them. We have to trust in the laws.

RN: The laws! Hmph! The laws of New Rome are only as good as the emperor who enforces them, and he enforces them only when it suits him. God's laws are the only ones you can trust, because God always enforces them.

M: But why did God let things slide so badly out of control in the world then? How could he let his world decay and his people diminish like this? Why, we two are just about the only two groups of people in the world who know the true God, and we're a tiny minority. When will the rest of the world ever learn?

RN: When the Messiah comes.

M: We believe he has come already.

RN: Then why didn't he set things right if he was the true Messiah? Look how bad things have been since the time of Jesus. Ancient Greece and Rome were the last really civilized societies the world has ever had, and the Dark Ages have lasted sixteen centuries now. Will we ever regain the ancient glory?

M: Well? Will we?

RN: When the Messiah comes.

M: And when he comes, what do you believe he will do?

RN: He will establish the kingdom of God.

M: Will the Messiah depose the emperor? Will he enter politics?

RN: Most of us think so. That is one theory. Another is that he will be a spiritual leader, a holy man, a wise man.

M: Jesus was a holy man and a wise man.

RN: But he didn't establish a kingdom, did he?

M: No.

RN: Then how can he be the Messiah?

M: Are you trying to convert me out of my religion?

RN: Are you afraid to ask questions about it?

M: Why do you rabbis always answer a question with another question?

RN: Why *shouldn't* a rabbi answer a question with another question?

M: Ha! You Jews seem to be the only people in the world with a sense of humor. Why is that?

RN: We are God's chosen people.

M: And God is a comedian?

RN: Indeed. Have you ever looked straight at an ostrich?

M: Seriously, how do you keep your sense of humor in such a world as this?

RN: It is our survival trick.

M: No, seriously, Rabbi, how do you cope with what you called the power shortage—*God's* power shortage?

RN: When the Messiah comes, God will put forth his power.

M: So you believe that the Messiah will depose the emperor?

RN: I personally do not think so. I think that the greatest power in the world is holiness, not politics.

M: That sounds like something Jesus would have said. And something the Satanists would laugh at. And so would the emperor.

RN: God will have the last laugh.

M: Do you think he will laugh in scorn?

RN: No, I think he will laugh in love.

M: Love?

RN: Not the love that is sweet feelings, but the love that is self-sacrifice. That is the greatest power.

M: How can self-sacrifice be the greatest *power*?

RN: Didn't your own master Jesus say something like that?

M: Yes, but I never understood it. I guess that's because I never *saw* it. If he were only alive, maybe we would be able to see it still today. But his story ended with defeat and death, just like ours. And not just death but crucifixion. (Bitterly:) That's what happens to love: it gets crucified by power.

RN: No, child. That is not the last word. Love is stronger than hate. Good is stronger than evil. God is stronger than Satan.

M: Then why does the story of the good man end with death? If love is stronger than evil, why isn't love stronger than death?

RN: When the Messiah comes, God will conquer even death, and the righteous dead will rise.

M: When the Messiah comes! When the Messiah comes! You keep harping on that. You pin all your hopes on this mythical figure.

RN: I thought *you* pinned your hopes on him too, and I thought you believed that he was not a mythical figure but a real historical person, this Jesus of yours.

M: He is our ideal.

RN: But not your power source?

M: What do you mean?

RN: He preached that beautiful "Sermon on the Mount," didn't he? About loving your enemies and turning the other cheek, and poverty and even persecution being blessed?

M: Yes.

RN: So how do you expect to have the power to practice that high and holy way of life?

M: We don't. It's our ideal. We strive toward it, as we strive toward the stars.

RN: And you have about as much hope of attaining that ideal as you have of getting to the stars. Your ideal is very much like the stars: the stars are very beautiful but they are so high and far away that they give little light for our daily walk on this earth.

M: But what else can we do? All we can do is to try, and do our best. How can God expect more than that?

RN: But *do* you do your best? Do any of us?

M: You ask such piercing questions! To answer you honestly, no, we don't do our best. We wouldn't feel guilty if we did. So tell me, Rabbi, do you think these high ideals are worthless, then?

RN: Not at all. I believe *God* gave us those high ideals.

M: But they are too high for our power.

RN: Exactly. We ^o can live them only with *his* power.

M: But how do we get *that*?

RN: Somehow, God has to get inside us, not just outside us.

M: And how can *that* happen?

RN: When the Messiah comes, it is said that he will put God's Spirit into our hearts.

M: The Messiah again!

RN: Do you have any better answer to the problem of evil?

M: No. God and goodness seem so distant. We struggle with evil—our own evil and the evil of our enemies—and we always lose. How can we ever win?

RN: I think I saw a little glimmer of light in answer to that just today, when I was in prayer and asking God that very question. I asked him: "Why do I always fail? Is it my fault or yours?" And I held up both hands as I said it, like this (holds up both hands), as if my left hand was myself and my right hand was God. And I think I got an answer to my question.

M: You mean God *spoke* to you?

RN: No, not in words. But there was a sign. My two hands came together, like this (moves hands slowly together), without my conscious effort. I took that as a sign, and as my answer: If God and we somehow came together, we could conquer evil, starting with the evil inside our souls, our own sins. But he *will* not do it without us, and we *cannot* do it without him. He will not do it without us because of our freedom, and we cannot do it without him because of our bondage.

M: That is very profound.

RN: But it is not enough. Because the problem remains: *how* do we get together? It is easy for my two hands to come together, but how can the immortal God and mortal man come together? My only answer is hope: hope that when the Messiah comes, God will put his own Spirit inside us. The Messiah will solve the problem.

M: But that's what we believe Jesus did! He and God . . . he was so close to God that he called him his Father.

RN: But how can *you* get so close to God? How can you call God your Father?

M: He is the answer to that question, somehow.

RN: How?

M: We don't know. He solves it somehow.

RN: If your Messiah is dead, how can he do anything? How can a corpse

change your life? How can a dead man give new life to the living?

M: He lived the ideal life, and we cherish his memory.

RN: Why do you cherish the memory of an ideal that tortures you because it is unattainable?

M: You're right, it does torture us. But it also inspires us. I have a picture of it in my mind that I can't quite define, but it won't go away. A picture of a new life. I know this is the answer, but I don't know the way to it.

RN: Didn't your Jesus say once, "I am the way"?

M: Yes.

RN: Well, what did he mean by that? How could the *way* be a *man*?

M: I never understood that. Yet I've always been haunted by it, as if it were something hovering teasingly close, just out of reach. I think the answer is somewhere in that legend about Jesus rising from the dead. If only he had risen from the dead, if only he were still alive, if only he were still really present—that would solve *everything*.

RN: But he didn't, and he isn't, and he can't.

M: How do you Jews solve the problem of evil?

RN: Well, we distinguish the thing itself, its cause and its result. The thing itself is our own sins. The cause is our separation from God. And the result is God's just punishment.

M: I didn't mean how you solve the problem of *defining* evil. I meant how you *deal* with it.

RN: We hope in God's forgiveness.

M: And how do you obtain that?

RN: We used to have temple sacrifices, before the Romans destroyed the second temple.

M: You slaughtered animals, didn't you?

RN: Yes.

M: Why?

RN: Because "without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins."

M: But the temple no longer exists.

RN: No. So now we live in hope. Hope that when the Messiah comes . . .

M: The Messiah again!

RN: Yes. We are a very concrete, historical people. We do not hope in ideals, we hope in persons. Beginning with God himself.

M: But aren't you afraid to meet him?

RN: Of course. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

M: I'm afraid to meet him too.

RN: At death, you mean?

M: Yes. First of all, I'm not even sure there *is* any life after death. The only evidence for it is abstract philosophical arguments. No one has ever come back from the dead.

RN: This is true, alas.

M: And then, even if there *is* life after death, how can we be sure God will forgive us for our sins and take us to heaven? What is my entrance ticket? I wish I knew. Life is hard, but death is even harder, isn't it? But tell me, Rabbi, how do you Jews face death? You seem to do it better than anyone. You've been persecuted and tortured and martyred for thousands of years. I'm puzzled by two things about you: how do you endure life, and how do you endure death? What is your secret?

RN: It is not our secret, it is God's secret. We are his chosen people. He gives us special graces to endure, until . . .

M: Until the Messiah comes!

RN: Yes.

M: Well, I envy you. You are a sign of hope to this whole bitter world.

I just wish I had some idea of what to hope for. It's got to be something stronger than death. Something *has* to be stronger than death.

RN: God is stronger than death.

M: Yes, but how do we plug into God? It's easy for God to conquer death, but it's impossible for us. Unless . . . unless God somehow connects us up to him, or connects himself down to us. If only Jesus had risen from the dead! Then *he* would be the link, the man with divine power, the man with . . . the man with a divine nature, if that is possible . . .

RN: Hush, child! You speak blasphemy. And foolishness as well. Myth and moonshine, all this talk about a man rising from the dead. Come on, let's struggle home. We don't have time for such impossible dreams. We have to put one foot in front of the other. Here, let my slave carry your tree—and also that other package you are carrying. What is that, by the way?

M: It's what we put on the tree for Christmas. It's frankincense and myrrh.

RN: Burial spices! Why?

M: We like to preserve his memory. That's our secret of living.

RN: Poor soul! You seek the living among the dead!

*If the bones of the dead Jesus were discovered tomorrow in a Palestinian tomb,
all the essentials of Christianity would remain unchanged.*

RUDOLF BULTMANN

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain and your faith is in vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

ST. PAUL