Prologue

It took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century. Why not? This question set us off on a five-year pilgrimage that led to this book.

Initially, we didn't believe it could be true. Surely the art historians were wrong. The crucified Christ was too important to Western Christianity. How could it be that images of Jesus's suffering and death were absent from early churches? We had to see for ourselves and consider what this might mean.

In July 2002, we traveled to the Mediterranean in search of the dead body of Jesus. We began in Rome, descending from the blaze of the summer sun into the catacombs where underground tunnels and tombs are carved into soft tufa rock. The earliest surviving Christian art is painted onto the plaster-lined walls of tombs or carved onto marble sarcophagi as memorials to the interred.

In the cool, dimly lit caverns, we saw a variety of biblical images. Many of them suggested rescue from danger. For example, Abraham and Isaac stood side by side in prayer with a ram bound next to them. Jonah, the recalcitrant prophet who was swallowed and coughed up by a sea monster, reclined peacefully beneath the shade of a vine. Daniel stood alive and well between two pacified lions. Other images suggested baptism and healing, such as the Samaritan woman drawing water from a well, John the Baptist dousing Jesus, depicted as a child, and

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus also appeared as a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders like Orpheus.

We could not find a dead Jesus, not even one. It was just as the angel had said to the women looking for Jesus at his tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5). "He is not here" (Mark 16:6). He most certainly was not.

Emerging from the underworld, we traipsed the dusty streets of the city to continue our investigation of the mystery of the missing corpse. Some art historians said there was a Crucifixion carved on the doors of St. Sabina Church, so we trudged up the hill from the Tiber to see it late one sweltering afternoon. Under the church's covered entrance were two huge, fifteen-hundred-year-old cypress doors with thirty-two scenes from the Bible. Each carved relief panel was about eighteen by twelve inches. Among them, we were told, would be one of the oldest known representations of the Crucifixion, created around 425.

We spotted it in the far upper left corner. Three robust, bearded men faced forward: a large central figure flanked by two smaller ones. They wore loincloths and stood firmly, unwounded and unbowed. They raised their stout, strong arms to the side, elbows slightly bent, hands shoulder high. We'd seen this familiar stance in the catacombs. Art historians call it the *orant,* the ancient position for prayer, a posture of both strength and openness, as if the arms were ready to embrace the viewer. Abraham, Isaac, and Daniel had stood in such a position in the catacombs. In this image on the door, the open palms of Christ and the two thieves were nailed to small blocks of wood behind their hands. The blocks were the only trace of crosses. They stood before what appeared to be a brick wall with an open window on the upper left side. Their wide-open eyes gazed at the viewer. This image, we realized, depicted victory over death. Jesus was definitely not dead.

From Rome we went to Istanbul and then to a remote part of northeastern Turkey where the crumbling remains of ninth- to eleventh-century monastery churches could be found upon high mountains. We failed to find even one dead Jesus. Returning to Italy, we lingered for several days in Ravenna to examine its beautifully restored fifth- and sixth-century mosaics.

In the sixth-century St. Apollinare Nuovo Church, at the edge of the old city, we found the earliest surviving life story of Jesus depicted in images. Near the ceiling on both sides of the basilica nave, thirteen rectangular mosaics marched from the chancel toward the main door. We examined each of the twenty-six panels closely. On the right wall near the chancel, an image of the Last Supper began the thirteen scenes of his Passion. At panel ten we encountered Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross for Jesus to Golgotha. We expected to see the Crucifixion on panel eleven. Instead, we were confronted by an angel who sat before a tomb. The apparition spoke to two women swaying forward like Gospel choir singers. We too leaned forward in astonishment and remembered what the angel had said: "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here" (Matt. 28:5–6). The remaining panels showed the risen Christ visiting his followers in the stories of doubting Thomas (John 20:19–29) and the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–43).

We found no Crucifixions in any of Ravenna's early churches. The death of Jesus, it seemed, was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith for the Christians who worshipped among the churches' glittering mosaics. The Christ they saw was the incarnate, risen Christ, the child of baptism, the healer of the sick, the teacher of his friends, and the one who defeated death and transfigured the world with the Spirit of life.

Why were we looking for the living among the dead? Like most Western Christians, we were accustomed to images of a Christ who died in agony. We had learned in church and in graduate school that Christians believed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ saved the world and that this idea was the core of Christian faith. In our book *Proverbs of Ashes,* we challenged this idea because we saw that it contributed to sanctioning intimate violence and war. It uses Jesus's death as the supreme model of self-sacrificing love and encourages those who want to follow him to love in the same way. It places victims of violence in harm's way and absolves perpetrators of their responsibility for unethical behavior. The idea deeply troubled us, but we never questioned its centrality to Christianity.

After our book was published, we discovered that the idea troubled many Christians. We were invited to discuss our book on Christian radio stations and had lively, engaged conversations with many listeners who were also concerned that this idea might encourage domestic violence and the sexual abuse of children. Rita's sister-in-law, the daughter of Christian missionaries, wrote us a long letter of gratitude because the book made her think more deeply about her faith. We were gratified that so many were willing to listen to what we had to say and to think about what they believed about the Crucifixion. Even so, we were unprepared for the possibility that Christians did not focus on the death of Jesus for a thousand years.

After we investigated early Christian art, we stepped back, astonished at the weight of the reality: Jesus's dead body was just not there. We could not find it in the catacombs or Rome's early churches, in Istanbul's great sixth-century cathedral Hagia Sophia, in the monastery churches in northeastern Turkey, or in Ravenna's mosaics. The mystery of its absence deepened. We searched as many sources of early Christian art as we could find; we studied with an expert on first-millennium art at the University of California in Berkeley, and we consulted several times with a distinguished scholar of Christian art.[1]

After we realized that the Crucifixion was absent, we began to pay attention to what *was* present in early Christian art. We found one arresting image in an unlikely place, the most important church in Western Christendom and still the *cathedra* (seat) of the bishop of Rome, St. Giovanni in Laterano. The basilica was donated to the church by Constantine (274–337). Though the pope now resides at the Vatican, this church is still his official seat. What we saw in the apse of this basilica astonished us. Though the apse mosaic image has changed and been restored over the centuries, parts of it likely date to the fourth to sixth centuries.[2]

We arrived at St. Giovanni during Mass. It was conducted from a high baroque altar—residue, to modern eyes, of one of the more incongruent restorations of the seventeenth century—placed where the nave and transept intersect. The altar displayed a triptych painting with the

Crucifixion in the center. It completely hid the apse. We walked quietly down the right aisle, tiptoed up the transept stairs, ignored the velvet rope blocking further progress, and sneaked behind the altar. When we spotted the apse, we gasped in wonder. At the top of its curve, a bust of Jesus gazed down, serious and dignified. His golden nimbus outlined his countenance against a dark blue background strewn with white, red, and blue clouds. Winged seraphim hovered at the upper edges of the image, four on a side. A single seraphim hovered directly above him upside down, wings spread out.

Below this upper blue crescent of sky, the apse sparkled in gold, like the light in a dawn sky. Immediately below Jesus's bust, a dove emerged head down in the golden sky, like the seraphim above his head, with wings similarly spread. From its beak, a pale stream of water poured downward. Below the dove was a gold, segmented cross, with a large jewel in the center of each segment. The stream of water fell behind the cross, slowly widening until it formed a translucent pool around its base. In the center of the cross was an oval medallion. It showed Jesus standing in water, his head slightly bowed while John the Baptist on the shore poured water over his head.

At the base of the golden cross, next to the pool, two delicate six-pointed deer, one on either side, stood atop a hill of grass and flowers. They turned toward the cross, heads lowered, and gazed at the viewer. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). Below the pool, four rivers flowed out below the tree like roots, two curving left and two curving right, so that the rivers seemed to lift the cross out of the meadow below. They were carefully labeled Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates, the rivers of paradise in Genesis 2:11–14. Three snow-white sheep on either side, slightly smaller than the deer and directly beneath them, drank from the streams. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1).

Where the rivers split left and right, they made a triangle in the meadow. Inside the triangle, directly below the cross, a small golden city nestled as if protected by the rivers. A saint stood before the city. Behind his head, above the city, waved a palm tree in whose fronds a pea-

cock perched, both images of immortality. Busts of Peter and Paul peered above the city towers. At the base of the entire apse, the rivers merged with the Jordan. The great river flowed laterally across the bottom of the apse, with a lush meadow, dotted with birds and flowers, as its bank. In the river itself, swans paddled serenely in pairs, a couple of cherubs fished from a boat, one cherub rode a swan, another swam in the waves, and a fifth wind-surfed across them.

This image penetrated our consciousness until, at last, we understood: we stood in paradise. The image depicted a vision found in a popular third-century Christian text called the *Apocalypse of Paul*:

> I entered Paradise and saw the beginning of waters, and the angel beckoned me. . . . And when I had gone inside I saw a tree planted from whose roots water flowed out, and from this was the beginning of the four rivers. And the Spirit of God rested on that tree, and when the Spirit blew, the waters flowed forth, and I said, "My Lord, is it this tree itself which makes the waters flow?" And he said to me, "From the beginning, before the heavens and earth appeared, the Spirit has been resting upon this tree; wherefore, whenever the Spirit blows, the waters flow forth from the tree."[3]

As we looked at other early church interiors, we saw more clearly how each captured dimensions of paradise. The spaces placed Christians in a lush visual environment: a cosmos of stars in midnight skies, golden sunlight, sparkling waters teeming with fish, exuberant fauna, and verdant meadows filled with flowers and fruit trees. Punctuating such scenes were images of the great cloud of witnesses, many dressed in purple robes of nobility. Others wore white robes of baptism as brides of Christ. They wore or carried wreaths of victory. Many apse images included exactly four rivers flowing from a lamb, globe, or golden cross.

Paradise, we realized, was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries. This both disconcerted and intrigued us. On the one hand, we were dismayed to think that early Christians appeared to be

obsessed with the afterlife. On the other hand, we wondered why they covered every inch of church walls with such beautiful sights. We contemplated what it felt like to worship in such spaces. We studied ancient liturgies, ritual practices, prayers, and hymns that may have been used in these churches. We tried, in other words, to feel and sense our way into their visual and liturgical worlds. We also explored early commentaries on Genesis. Reading early church texts on paradise, we sought to understand the ideas worshippers held as they daily prayed, processed, stood, sang, and partook of the Eucharist in such spaces.

To our surprise and delight, we discovered that early Christian paradise was something other than "heaven" or the afterlife. Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on the earth. Images of it in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within. Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world's luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful.

Like the breathing of a human body, the images said that God blessed the earth with the breath of Spirit. It permeated the entire cosmos and made paradise the salvation that baptism in the Spirit offered. As the most blessed place imaginable, paradise was also where the departed saints rested from their earthly labors and returned to visit those who loved them. In early Christian understandings, even heaven was a dimension of this life; it was the mysterious abode of God from which blessings flowed upon the earth. Nearby to heaven, the dead rested in their own neighborhood of paradise.

After thirty years of working in religion and theology, we had stumbled inadvertently into paradise. Like most scholars of Christian history and theology, we had studied the texts of creeds and councils, chronicling the many struggles over doctrine. We were taught to regard Chris-

tian theology as the gradual unfolding of the truth of orthodox Christianity. Some misguided and infamous heretics contested this truth, but the church "fathers" had vigorously defended it and triumphed. We have been skeptical of such a limited and apologist version of the faith, but we have had to find our own resources for alternative understandings to derail this juggernaut.[4]

Nearly everything we had previously understood about Christian history, theology, and ritual began to shift as we delved deeper into the meaning of paradise. We felt as if we had been climbing a long, steep mountain trail. We could see behind us the terrain we had trudged through—an arid Golgotha landscape of sharp, barren rocks that had left us thirsty, sore, and spent. At a sudden turn, the switchbacks opened onto a new vista. Opening before us were vast meadows, lush and green. When we began to look at early Christianity through the lens of its visual and ritual worlds, we found that much of what we'd been taught had to be reexamined—beginning with our modern assumptions that doctrinal texts provided a primary orientation to early Christian faith. We worked to understand the world of early Christianity not as the literate few knew it but as the visually literate many knew it when they worshipped in churches and recited memorized scriptures and creeds. For them, visual art and poetic and narrative literature, found in prayers, stories, psalms, and hymns, shaped Christian life and sustained it.

Beauty and art—in all its forms—engage the more holistic, emotional, and sensory-laden dimensions of experience and memory. They capture multilayered experiences of imagination, feeling, perceiving, and thinking. Through art, the aesthetic, emotional, sensory, and intellectual dimensions of life can come together and be mixed in fresh ways. Throughout this book, and especially in Part I, we have tried to capture the experience of the liturgical spaces of the early Christian world. We include descriptions of some of the images, selections from liturgical poetry and stories, and concrete details of rituals. Though we recognize that these are inadequate to convey the sensory spaces and experiences of a distant time, we have sought to communicate something of the aesthetic experience of paradise.

In addition to these forms of beauty and liturgy, we have drawn on a variety of early thinkers in creating a picture of the early church and its understandings of paradise. We have reached across a wide terrain of resources for understanding early Christianity, including thinkers in Asia, Europe, and Africa who used Latin, Greek, or Syriac as their main language. Although contemporary Christians separate the heretics from the orthodox leaders, at the time these disputes arose such clean divides were not always so obvious. Some heretics, such as Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 254), had great influence on orthodox thinkers. On occasion, we have lifted up voices or texts we believe merit greater attention—some of which may surprise the reader. Finally, in some cases, with well-known thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo and texts such as the Gospel of John and the Martyrdom of Perpetua, we offer alternative ways of reading them in terms of paradise. We reach across such a vast spectrum of thinkers and traditions for two reasons. First, the spectrum allows us to demonstrate how pervasive an idea paradise was in early Christianity, and, second, it reveals how thinkers adapted their views of paradise in relation to the specificities of their own cultures and geographies.

Part I of this book is a genealogy of paradise, showing how it was understood to be in this world and on the earth. We examine the earliest roots of paradise in chapter 1, reaching back nearly four thousand years to explore how the ancient people of West Asia imagined paradise as the best that life could be, long before it was written about in Genesis 1–2. We show how the Bible's Hebrew prophets invoked the Garden of Eden to raise ethical questions about the exploitation and carnage of empires—even to challenge the kings of Israel. We note how biblical authors periodically rewrite the stories of Creation and paradise in new ways to highlight the importance of their times and places to the fate of God's world. In chapter 2, we examine how stories of Jesus in the Gospels develop this prophetic tradition during times of Roman oppression, using the idea of the kingdom, or reign, of God. We show how they reinterpret Genesis 1–2 in the first century. In addition, we discuss the meaning of the Passion stories and the Crucifixion in relation to the church's claim that this world is paradise. We unlock a form of Chris-

tianity that affirmed life in this world as the place of salvation. Within their church communities, Christians sought to help life flourish in the face of imperial power, violence, and death. Though persecuted, they refused to surrender their identity as members of the church, and the empire executed them for it. In chapter 3, we explore the meaning of martyrdom in relation to paradise, as well as the emergence of apocalyptic ideas as resistance to Rome.

The church's fortunes changed significantly starting in the early fourth century under the Emperor Constantine. In chapter 4, we discuss the church's power struggle with Rome, as emperors attempted, with little success, to inflict uniformity of belief upon the culturally diverse and disputatious world of early churches. We find that struggle especially evident in the flourishing of ideas of the church as paradise in this world. In claiming the space of paradise, Christians staked out ground separate from the rule of Christian emperors and made their spaces superior to any place that marked imperial power. We also examine how, in this pivotal century, church teachers shifted gender ideas to favor more masculine models, established uniformity of belief as the basis of church, and created a deeply fractured relationship to Judaism. Christians understood that they failed often to live as they should. Their failures, however, were not a sign to them of paradise lost, but a sign of their failure to live ethically in it.

The subject of chapter 5 is the intense training that Christians received to prepare them to be initiated into paradise in this life. Through baptism, Christians learned to resist the forces of sin and evil and become wise about how good and evil work in the world, especially the oppressive powers of empires. In becoming ever wiser, Christians were expected to take responsibility for the power they received through the church, a power we call "ethical grace." Christians undertook spiritual disciplines together and looked to Jesus as the model of their own divinity and of their own agency in life. As savior, Jesus enabled their adoption into God's family of divinity. He embodied Spirit in human flesh, he transfigured the world, and he reopened the paradise garden on this earth, created by God as the home of humanity. In this exami-

nation of spiritual practices, we focus on the Jerusalem church in the second half of the fourth century as an example of what initiates to Christian baptism undertook in learning lifelong disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines were essential to being at home in the world as paradise. To experience the Spirit of God in all things and the beauties of this world, early Christians cultivated acute attunement to the life around them. We conclude Part I with a twofold discussion of the new humanity the church envisioned and the power of beauty as humanity's ethical basis. We examine how Christians struggled to stay grounded in love, in justice, in nonviolence, in wisdom, and in freedom, to live together as humanity in the garden of God. Church communities helped everyone to share resources, to cultivate wisdom and honesty, to understand ideas and doctrines, and to care for each other in sickness and need. They created systems of restitution, rehabilitation, and restoration that acknowledged human failure and expected all to take responsibility for their uses of power. These practices did not lead early Christians to idealize themselves or this world. They saw life as an arena of struggle to gain wisdom and to live ethically and responsibly toward others, so that love might flourish in their communities and so that they might live now in paradise together.

As the paradise of early Christianity entered our vision and seeped into our consciousness, crucifixion-centered Christianity seemed increasingly strange to us. We wondered what had happened to the understanding of this world as paradise. When and why did Christianity shift to an obsession with atoning death and redemption through violence? What led Western Christianity to replace resurrection and life with a crucifixion-centered salvation and to relegate paradise to a distant afterlife?

In Part II, we unravel the mystery of paradise expelled from this world in the Christian West, especially in the ninth to thirteenth centuries. Like detectives in search of a murder victim, we followed a trail of clues that led us, finally, to a body. We found the corpse of Jesus for the first time at a considerable distance from the Mediterranean world, in the forests of the far north of Europe, where the Rhine wends its way

from the Alps to the North Sea. Saxon artists carved the first Crucifixions—life-size three-dimensional wooden figures—in the tenth century. Their ninth-century ancestors were forced by Charlemagne's soldiers to be baptized at the point of a sword, so that Latin Christianity came to them accompanied by death. The oldest crucifix to survive, the Gero Cross, was created around 965 and is found in the Cathedral of St. Peter and Maria in Cologne, Germany. Chapter 9 tells this tragic tale.

Chapter 10 describes the decisive turning point toward violence, which arrived in 1095, when Pope Urban the II launched the First Crusade in an attempt to quell the feudal violence plaguing Europe. Urban declared that war was not only just, it was holy—it was a pilgrimage that served God and that enacted love for one's kin. Crusaders who killed Jews and Muslims earned forgiveness for all their sins and were assured of a place in paradise *after* death, not after baptism. This moral confusion about violence postponed paradise and made it a reward for killing. Holy war became the route to paradise. In chapter 11, we examine the theological innovations that supported the Crusades, especially an explicit theology of atonement, which proposed that God became human in Jesus in order to die on the cross and pay the penalty for humanity's sins, a death pleasing to God. We show how the erotic joy of paradise was transformed into a union of eros and torture, worship of violence and victims, and self-inflicted harm.

In chapter 12, we expose the impoverishment of spiritual resources and the tragedy of the Christian turn to a piety of Crucifixion during the disasters that afflicted western Europe in the fourteenth century. As a response to the reclosing of paradise and a piety of suffering, western Europe devised various escape routes from this world. We describe a number that emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and led to the transatlantic slave trade, the Protestant Reformation, and the conquest and colonization of North America.

Chapter 13 tells the story of the early history of New England first from the perspective of the natives who lived there, then from the perspective of the Calvinist Europeans seeking to build paradise free of the corrupting influences of Europe. Calvinist approaches to paradise re-

main important in both conservative and liberal expression of white American Christianity. In the wake of the worst war in the history of the last five hundred years in North America, King Philip's War of 1675–76, we describe the emergence of an "American" identity, developed through the Great Awakening and the myth of the extinct American Indian.

Finally, in chapter 14, we discuss the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reforming impulses of American Christianity that sought to reclaim the value of life in this world and salvation *on earth,* as it is in heaven. Some nineteenth-century thinkers returned humanity to an appreciation for nature and individual spiritual development. Among their acts of reclaiming the goodness of this world, Christians challenged the medieval atonement theology holding that Jesus's death saved the world. They also exposed the narrow, self-centered piety of personal sin and salvation and involved themselves in the struggle for the abolition of slavery and the fight for women's suffrage. They argued that socially organized sin was a far greater evil than personal sins; then they set to work to create justice for the poor, imprisoned, and oppressed. We examine the strengths and the limitations of these reform movements as partial ways to recover the sensibility that paradise is in this life and in this world.

This book is a work of love for this life, in all its tragedies and stunning beauty. As we pieced together the forgotten history of paradise, we discovered how life-affirming forms of Christianity succumbed to the focus on redemptive violence that marks the second millennium of the Christian West. Without such understanding, the Christian West will carry forward fatal errors as though they were damaged genetic codes: invisible, silent killers. We conclude with a meditation on what life in the twenty-first century will require of Christians. In reflecting on the meaning of paradise for our world now, we offer no final solution to the dilemmas of our times. Instead we suggest fresh ways of understanding our dilemmas so that new spiritual guideposts become clearer as we struggle for social change for the common good.

Christians have always sought to see their faith, history, future, and

relationship to the world and to other faiths in ways relevant to their concrete historical lives. We recover here a life-giving, life-affirming Christianity, rooted in an ancient Mesopotamian past, that has survived despite many attempts to repress or destroy it and despite theological shifts that have betrayed it. We offer our study of this world as paradise as a way to retrieve a faith that affirms the many ways that people love one another, themselves, and the earth. Such faith remains deeply skeptical of the human will to power and the need to think of the saved as innocent and good. As inheritors of Western Christianity and citizens of a New World stolen from those who still live upon this land, we believe we must stand again at the open doors of paradise and bless this world as sacred soil, as holy ground, and as a home which all must learn to inhabit together.

We seek to rekindle Christian traditions that hold fast to love and thereby teach Christian people how, in the midst of horror and tragedy and loss, to resist violence, to honor the earth, and to humanize life. We offer an understanding of freedom and human agency that calls for responsible uses of power to create just relationships—the cultivation of ethical grace through a love of beauty. This activity of love, embodied in heart, soul, mind, and bodily strength, lies at the core of our work for justice, freedom, human rights, sustainable life, and peace. We invite you now to return home to paradise with us so that, together, we can save it.