

DISCOVERING JOY

Four Thought Experiments for the Fourth Week

Robert R. Marsh

Thought experiments are devices of the imagination used to investigate the nature of things.¹

ISAAC NEWTON THOUGHT ABOUT rotating a bucket of water as a way to establish that space is absolute; Einstein wondered what it might be like to ride a ray of light and derived the special theory of relativity; Schrödinger imagined a cat in a half-lethal box to explore the quantum measurement problem. Asking the right question can be a way to uncover surprising truths.

I want to ask some questions about the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises because, for several reasons, the Fourth Week tends to get short shrift. In practice, it is prone to be shoehorned into the diminishing days of a thirty-day retreat, when energy is flagging and what-happens-next is looming. The Fourth Week, I believe, also gets less theoretical attention since we seem to believe it is somehow ‘easy’—to experience and to understand—in comparison to the Third Week. Both factors lead to the Fourth Week being misunderstood by those giving and making the Exercises, with disappointing results. The grace to be prayed for in these days—joy with Christ in joy—seems simple enough but, as I remember my novice master, Ron Darwen, saying, ‘We think we know what joy is—we don’t!’ We must discover joy.

If anything should baffle us it is the resurrection. I am attempting here to deepen our ignorance of the Fourth Week, so that we may give it and make it more carefully, more gracefully. With that aim in mind here

¹ James Robert Brown and Yiftach Fehige, ‘Thought Experiments’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Fall 2011 Edition*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/thought-experiment>, accessed 25 February 2013.

are four questions about the Fourth Week of the Exercises—four thought experiments, if you will—to help us explore the impact of resurrection. I urge the reader to come up with at least one answer for each question before reading on.

1. Imagine Jesus died on the cross *exactly* on his 33rd birthday. How old do you suppose he was when he rose from the dead?
2. We use natural metaphors to talk about death and resurrection—winter and spring, caterpillars and butterflies, etc. Do you think that means the resurrection of Jesus is a natural event?
3. Jesus died and rose again on the third day. What difference has that made to the world? What *work* do you suppose the resurrection does?
4. Ignatius presents the Risen Jesus as full of joy and tells us to ask to share in his joy. Why is Jesus joyful? What do you suppose he is joyful *about*?

Wrangle with those questions (or contemplate them serenely if you prefer) before reading further.

Dead

The first thought experiment comes from James Alison in the preview to his video course, *The Forgiving Victim*.² It is simple: imagine Jesus died on the cross exactly on his 33rd birthday ... how old was he when he rose on the third day?

This is not a trick question (for example a textual quibble over whether he rose after three days or on the third day) but a deep question about living and dying. Let's push it. How old is Jesus today? Alison's answer is that, of course, he does not have *any* age—he died! Age applies to the living. He was 33 when he died and now he is ... what? Dead! In the Risen Jesus, James Alison says, you have a dead man walking and talking. And I think he is right—this is whom we contemplate in the Fourth Week.

The Jesus of the Fourth Week is not a resuscitated corpse—like Lazarus or the son of Nain—he is not living again in any way that living makes

² *The Forgiving Victim Preview*, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFo0n_RUxu4, accessed 20 March 2013. Alison raises the question in a slightly different way in his *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1993).



Christ Appearing to the Apostles after the Resurrection, by William Blake

sense to us. He is not any longer *mortal*. Lazarus died again but the Risen Jesus did not. Does not.

And yet there he is in the Gospels, walking and talking—admittedly very strangely: eating fish but walking through locked doors; not being recognisable but being known. So *what* is he? Is he a ghost? The Gospels seem to go out of their way to rule that possibility out—he eats, he can be touched, he *breathes*. But, says James Alison, the real reason we know he is not a ghost is that he does not do what ghosts *always* do: they seek the settling of some wrong, the punishment of some offence. They *rattle their chains* and demand vengeance and seek release. But the Risen Jesus walks down the road to Emmaus opening scripture to the disciples and telling them that it was all meant to be—and then opens their minds to a new way of living through a new community of broken bread.

The Risen Jesus, according to Alison, is raised precisely as a dead man. And Jesus does not explain that and he does not give us a theory of life and death or a treatise on how bad things can happen to good people. He does not come as the avenging angel, but nor is he victimized. What he gives the disciples is not an idea but an action, a liturgy, something for them to *do*. It is in the doing that they find themselves on a new path.

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What do those making the Exercises experience in the Fourth Week? Well, not the celestial grief therapy some are expecting: as though they felt bad in the Third Week and now they can get back to feeling good because Jesus is alive again. He *is not*, and often those making the Exercises feel the clash of this dawning knowledge against their reasonable desire to feel joy. Ignatius sets joy as the grace to be asked for in the Fourth Week: joy with Christ in joy. How can a dead man feel joy? Whatever that joy is, it is an expansive reality—it is the engagement with a practice, a way of living, that opens up something radically new. The Fourth Week is not a return to the way things were with Jesus, but the turning upside-down of one's relationship with Jesus, with oneself and with the world. We think we are praying for joy in the Fourth Week, but actually we are praying to discover what joy really is.

Dead End

Let me shift focus from James Alison to Hans Urs von Balthasar. Von Balthasar does not exactly pose our second question as a thought experiment, but he has very clear opinions of those who propose natural metaphors to understand Jesus' death and resurrection.³

We are inclined to think about the paschal mystery using metaphors of winter and spring, night and day, even butterflies from caterpillars. We sing 'now the green blade riseth from the buried grain'. We even have scriptural precedent in John's talk of the life and death of the grain of wheat. But von Balthasar thinks all those images are 'obscene' attempts to protect ourselves from the reality of death when the *one* thing we know about it is that death is the end, the place from which there is no coming back. Von Balthasar's conviction is that the resurrection of Jesus is not a natural event: there is no natural process that will get Jesus back from the dead. Whatever happens on the third day, it will be impossible to grasp, it will be a completely gratuitous, totally surprising, new event. It will be unlike *anything*, except perhaps it will be like a new creation.

Possibly the most tempting naturalising trap for someone praying the Fourth Week is to presume that it should follow the spirit of the Paschal Triduum. The liturgy of the Triduum runs to a fixed rhythm of death, burial and resurrection, and evokes an emotional response in step. When our candles are lit and the lights are turned on we say 'he is risen' and

³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000).

turn to Easter songs to urge our hearts to happiness—the alleluias return. But the grace of the Fourth Week is not given smartly with the first contemplation of the Risen Jesus (any more than the grace of the First Week is given with the first exercise on sin) and cannot be forced. The grace, being grace, comes when it will and it has to be a surprise—there is no natural way of making it happen. And when it comes it can feel decidedly not what anyone was expecting. After all, the primary grace of the Fourth Week is not to become joyful but to spend time with someone who is—against all odds—joyful himself.

Von Balthasar spends a lot of time pondering what it can mean that Jesus was dead among the dead. How can it be that God will go to such lengths? How can even death and Hell be places where God can dwell? So, for him, the *hiatus* of Holy Saturday is as powerful a mystery as Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The Tomb Day—and its experience—is as much a place of grace as the days that surround it and not to be edged out by hurrying the resurrection.

But if resurrection is not *natural* do we not risk it becoming *arbitrary*—cut off from human experience and desire? The Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann has attempted to counter this arbitrariness by finding the pattern of death and resurrection in the life of the Trinity, speaking of the crucified God.⁴ He seems to see the death of Jesus as an *event* in the life of God, that suffering is part of divinity itself. Von Balthasar will not go that far, although he wants to preserve something of that insight. To do so he moves in almost the opposite direction. For him, the cry of abandonment on the cross and the finality of death cannot be alien to the *timeless* life of the Trinity: they must reveal something of the nature of God. What is it, he wonders, to be the Father of the Son in the Holy Spirit? He says, ‘We shall never know how to express the abyss-like depths of the Father’s self-giving, who makes himself “destitute” of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son’.⁵ There is eternally in God the ‘experience’ of ‘self-destitution’.

The Work of the Resurrection

Ignatius says in the Fourth Week, ‘Consider how the divinity, which seemed hidden during the Passion, now appears and manifests itself so miraculously in this Holy Resurrection, through its true and most holy

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Edinburgh: Alban, 1993).

⁵ Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, viii.

effects' (Exx 223). So what work does the resurrection do? According to Ignatius it *reveals* who God is. I want to explore two senses to this—and also what the resurrection, perhaps against our expectations, does not achieve.

According to Karl Rahner,⁶ speculation about salvation has tended to focus on theories about the work done by Jesus' death, using human metaphors to explain how his death could be salvific—how it paid a ransom, how it was a sacrifice, etc.—but they all end up placing God in a bad light, with God somehow having to appease God, often a violent God. Instead, he argues, the one thing we do know as the central proclamation of the Christian story is the resurrection. We might not know the '*how*' of the resurrection, we might even have doubts about how to make sense of the witness we do have, but there is no Christianity without resurrection. For Rahner, what the resurrection does is bear witness to the divinity. It acts as confirmation and vindication of the whole living and dying of Jesus. And, if I understand him, *that* is the salvation. That witness set something in motion to which we are heirs, in which we share.

This is an essential refocusing. I believe we have a tendency to make the Third Week carry the weight of the Exercises' dynamic. There are traces of the Third Week scattered throughout the Exercises, from the colloquy of the first exercise of the First Week, through the Two Standards and the Three Degrees of Humility. It is easy to read Ignatius on *agere contra* in a way coloured by crucifixion-influenced theories of atonement, so that self-sacrifice takes on a violent hue. According to Ignatius the Third Week is marked by the divinity being hidden and the Fourth Week by its revelation; and if we believe him then perhaps joy and consolation should mark our understanding of the Exercises as a whole.

I said that there were two senses in which the divinity is revealed in the Fourth Week. One is this simple vindication, the other is slightly harder to get at. Let me make an analogy with the theology of creation. There were two big mediaeval questions about creation: why is there something rather than nothing? And why do we have the world we have and not some other? If we can use von Balthasar's sense that the resurrection is as unprecedented as creation then we can see Rahner's angle on resurrection corresponding to the first question, and there

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (Concord: Paul and Company, 1982).

remains space for us to ask the other: why do we have *this* resurrection and not some other? This raises the question of who the Risen Jesus might have been but is *not*.

Joy and Risk

How might the resurrection have been different? Let me approach that question by proposing another thought experiment: why is the Risen Jesus full of joy, as Ignatius says he is?

Is Jesus just glad to be vindicated: ‘that was nasty for a while but should prove my point’? Does joy not imply some element of surprise, some sense of *risk* that things could have gone another way? How is it that Jesus does not come back as the vengeful ghost, rattling his chains? How come he returns always in the *office of consoler*, as Ignatius says? How come he does not go to Pilate and Caiaphas to show them where they went wrong? How come he only appears to his grieving disciples? How come he does not provide, even now, daily TV broadcasts establishing his divinity?

There are lots of questions. Here’s another: how do we know the resurrection has happened? How has it changed the real world? Do not the rich still oppress the poor? Are innocents not still sacrificed to violence? Is the world not still dangerous and violent and unjust? Why can’t we have the vengeful ghost, please? Just for a bit!

The central question of the Fourth Week is perhaps one of theodicy. How does the resurrection ‘make sense’ of the passion? Although it may never explicitly be posed, this question must be lived out for the person making the Exercises in order to find the grace of the Fourth Week: discovering joy.

Ignatius provides the space for this to happen by immersing the one praying in the experience of the Risen Jesus. What does Jesus do with



Study for a Risen Christ, by Michelangelo

his own pain, his own suffering? He still has the wounds, *but* he is joyful. Does he still have the pain? What does his joy say about the evil of his suffering—is he just glad it is over; does the turn of events in his favour make up for it? Are we tempted to make that into a theodicy?

Of all the things the resurrection *might* have accomplished we have *this*—Jesus in the office of consoler. And now, as then, the resurrection does not do its work as a *theory*: it takes the *experience* of undergoing consolation to do the work, not the idea. The Jesus of the resurrection is himself consoled—he has found joy despite pain, failure, alienation and death—but it seems that his consolation is non-transferable as an idea. There is no theodicy we can extract and promulgate to explain why bad things happen to good people. Only Jesus can speak for himself. It is not good enough to say that from evil a good may emerge that can make the evil worthwhile. The evil remains evil, no matter the joy that issues from its defeat. For anyone to speak for another and say that his or her pain is worthwhile is *obscene*. We may not even speak for God: only God can speak for Godself. And God, it seems, speaks by entering fully into death and wrong and sin and finding *there* a risky, surprising life, and a joy that declares its verdict on evil. But joy declares this, as it were, privately, in person. The Risen Jesus, still wounded, does not impose the joy of the resurrection, but instead only consoles those who also know death. And it is not a joy that pacifies but a joy that challenges and transforms, plunging the praying person into a community on mission.

Finding God in All Things

What does the one making the exercises take away from the Fourth Week? Obviously, if I am right about what it means that the Risen Jesus comes in the office of consoler, the grace of the Fourth Week is of its nature *personal*. But it is not entirely individual: it is an initiation into a practice of life in the world, a shared practice, a community of consolation. How does one live after the Exercises? In Ignatius' day the paradigm case of someone making the Exercises was of a man seeking incorporation into the Society of Jesus. For him, the experience of the Exercises was a *beginning*: the first of a series of experiences, *experimenta*, as a novice and the prelude to a life of shared apostolic service given shape by the Jesuit *Constitutions*. Nowadays, the majority of those making the Exercises do so individually and with a very diverse range of ecclesial commitments. James Alison understands the resurrection encounters

as creating a community of faith, but not by means of a new shared understanding demanding adherence, rather through participation in a practice that, in its inversion of boundaries, slowly creates a new understanding. How can this help us understand life after the Exercises?

It is said that the hallmark of Ignatian spirituality is ‘finding God in all things’, but this is a motto which must be read in light of the Fourth Week considerations with which we have been grappling. The Fourth Week asks—and keeps us asking—the questions we have multiplied above. What does it mean that Jesus is risen? And what does his rising say about the pain, suffering and injustice of the world? How do we find God in those? Can we discover joy?

Some misunderstand finding God in all things to mean that God is somehow equally ‘behind’ all events and circumstances, as though we need only look long enough at a tragedy to find some sense of God there to transform it. But the truth is that God is not impartial. God has a preferential option: God comes as consoler. The truth is that God does not always get what God wants: the rich still oppress the poor, resurrection or not. To find God in all things means that no class of experience is ruled out as a possible locus of experience of God. Any part of life may be a place where the Risen Christ may come as consoler and work some creative transformation.

Paolo Coutinho has it right when he says that the phrase ‘finding God in all things’ exactly inverts the truth.⁷ We err if we believe it is our task to seek and find God anywhere, when the reality is that God is always and everywhere, seeking and finding us wherever we are. The question posed in the Fourth Week, and re-posed and re-answered every day after the Exercises, is whether we will let Jesus be risen for us, whether we will accept a share of his baffling joy, whether we will let ourselves be consoled—individually and corporately for the life of the world.

Robert R. Marsh SJ studied chemistry at Oxford for several years before entering the Society of Jesus in 1986. After studies in London and Berkeley, he is now on the staff of Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, near Liverpool, in the UK.

⁷ See his talk, ‘Finding God in All Things, or Allowing God to Find Me?’, available at <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/what-is-ignatian-spirituality/finding-god-in-all-things-or-allowing-god-to-find-me-video/>, accessed 14 March 2013.