

Apparitions and experience

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IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, JESUS' RESURRECTION is attested by the traditions of the empty tomb and the appearances,¹ and it is the 'apparitions' that St Ignatius highlights for his Fourth Week contemplations. There are certain features that recur in the various biblical accounts. They highlight the structure or pattern of the experiences that disclosed to the dejected disciples that Jesus was risen, and I propose here to focus on these features because I observe them to be present in contemporary 'resurrection' (Fourth Week) experiences also. I home in on them in order to be able to link the distinctive character of the appearances of Jesus with the experience of salvation or resurrection in personal life today.

The various appearances of the Risen Jesus to his disciples, despite their obvious differences from one another, possess several common traits. Prominent among these are: *attitude transformation*, followed by *recognition*, which often occurs in a *companionship* situation, and is usually accompanied by a *change of mood and direction*.

Attitude transformation

In many of the post-resurrection encounters, a key feature is the attitude-shift that permits the recognizing of the Risen Jesus. This is especially so in the Fourth Gospel, in which is reported Mary's 'Rabbuni' in the garden (Jn 20:16), Thomas's 'my Lord and my God' (20:28) and the beloved disciple's words 'It is the Lord' (21:7). The feature of attitude-shift is found in Luke too, in the Emmaus story, where Jesus is recognized in the breaking of bread (Lk 24:31). Nor is it entirely absent from other appearance texts.² Its presence also points to the fact that, while there was something unknowable about Jesus, some change in him which made those who had known him so well experience difficulty in recognizing him, there was also something about the disciples that required changing in order for them to actually recognize Jesus. Thomas illustrates this well. Attitudinally, he was turned the wrong way. His conscious bias was not to recognize Jesus until he could assure himself beyond all doubt that it really was Jesus. 'Once bitten . . .', he was shy of being hurt and disappointed again. Mary Magdalen's attitude was similarly misdirected: Jesus had died,

she was trying to locate his body, and she was in a state of confusion and agitation. The strong voice of Jesus, prompting her to recognize that it was he who was calling her name, surprised her into a new attitude: an attitude of amazed recognition. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were a long time with Jesus before they recognized who he was. Their attitude made recognition impossible. Only very gradually did it change from one of departure from the scene where Jesus had been to one of return. The same is true of Peter, when he recognized him whom the beloved disciple had already recognized. So while it is true that there was a change in Jesus that made him difficult to recognize, it seems that there also had to be some change – at least of attitude – in the disciples, if they were to recognize him.

Being in need of an attitude-change in order to recognize that Jesus is alive is not foreign to retreatants who are entering the Fourth Week. Just as for the disciples after the death of Jesus, so also for contemporary persons can the experience of the Third Week be so shattering and depleting that the confident election of the Second Week now seems shaky and unsettled and the retreatant finds herself anxious to simply leave the situation of prayer.³ How different is this from Peter and the others going fishing, or the two disciples taking off for Emmaus, or Mary looking for the body of Jesus? The Fourth Week can also be entered in great tiredness, which limits a person's ability to see anything new. Or the retreatant can have an anxiety to see the living Jesus that is simply riding too high, following the pain at his death that has been experienced in the Third Week. These are all attitudes that need transforming by the Risen Lord if he is to be recognized. The last one can sometimes be accompanied by such a steely determination on the part of the retreatant not to lose all that was gained in the earlier weeks that this very (Pelagian) determination can actually block a gratuitous encounter with the now Risen Lord, whose appearances to his disciples have an unearned, gift character, tending to surprise them, 'from the side' as it were, when they are looking away, or going away, from him and have no expectation at all of an encounter. 'I dare not meet him simply on the road,' said a retreatant to me once; 'things happen to me because I seek them out. I prepare; results follow.' But, as the days passed, this man was drawn into graced reminiscence about his recently deceased father. And as he remembered encounters with him that had always seemed so fortuitous on his road through life, he began to see the salvific, gift-character of those 'chance' encounters and acquired an eye for the presence of the Risen Jesus in them – unearned, 'sideways', surprising – transforming cul-de-sacs into byways and

byways into highways – and death into life. Here indeed had been attitude transformation; here had the touch of the Risen Lord become concretely visible.

Recognition

The word ‘recognize’: ‘re-cognize’ or ‘know again’ is important. In the examples given of attitude transformation, there is an intervention in the disciples’ lives by the Risen Lord in a manner that jogs them into recognition through association with something that they have experienced already with him. How often must Mary have heard him call her name? . . . often enough, at any rate, for her to be able to hear again, as she had heard before, the distinctly personal way in which he spoke to her. If you doubt this, take the example of lifting the phone in your own life, expecting a certain person to be calling, and finding that it is someone else who is there. You know this someone else well, indeed intimately, but the fact that you were expecting a different person momentarily clouds your recognition. But when your name is said, in that familiar, known, intimate way by the person who is actually there, you respond: ‘Oh, it’s YOU; I just didn’t recognize you because I was expecting so-and-so, that’s all’. The beloved disciple’s recognizing of Jesus in the huge catch of fish is also recognition based on an event previously remembered: and what he saw before made it possible for him to see again. Similarly with the recognition by the Emmaus disciples at the breaking of bread. Their ‘downcast’ and ‘departing’ attitude was probably already breaking down through the warmth of Jesus’ accompanying presence; but it was the ‘breaking of bread’ that gave them full sight, sight to see what they had seen before in table-fellowship with him, who had so liked to celebrate meals with his friends. Even with Thomas it was re-cognition that proved the key: seeing again those wounds that he knew had been inflicted – and indeed touching and feeling them, just to make sure. Jesus met him where he was in order to bring him to where he could not yet be – by means of the remembered past into a present that offered a new future. All of these encounters, with Mary Magdalen, with the beloved disciple, with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and with Thomas, are personal-biographical, with personal story playing a key role and re-cognition building on what had been experienced in some way before.

What is true of the early disciples’ experience has similarities with what happens to people today. Often this fact becomes evident in the situation of retreat, in which – just as in the recognition texts examined – the Risen Lord reveals his presence in the retreatant’s life by

illuminating an occasion or circumstance from her biography that was a vehicle of his own enlivening (yet hitherto unrecognized) presence. In other words, Jesus shows that he lives now, in the midst of the retreatant's own life-circumstances. When meditating on the appearances of the Risen Jesus to his disciples, contemporary disciples are frequently given the gift of seeing how he 'appears' to them in their own lives. In so far as the Fourth Week 'works' – and for various reasons it often does not⁴ – the experience that the Risen Christ is alive will as likely as not be mediated by a personal biographical element that is illumined in meditating upon an apparition text. Through the person's identity – in his or her concrete, historical relationships – is mediated the aliveness of the Risen Jesus. I emphasize concrete, historical relationships here because it seems to me that, ordinarily at least, unmediated experience of the Risen Lord is not given but personal, mediated experience is – with some aspect (event, situation, person) from one's concrete historical life mediating the Risen Lord's aliveness to one.⁵ These contemporary 'appearances' of the Risen Jesus in the actual historical circumstances of people's lives exhibit a similar structure or pattern to the 'recognition' element in the disciples' experience as the Risen Jesus becomes visible in their lives by means of connection to some circumstance, event, situation in which they had experienced a salvific touch before (but without actually recognizing it). This will become clearer in the next section, in which examples are given.

Companionship

An important element in many of the post-resurrection encounters with the Risen Jesus is companionship. Disciples need each other in order to see who is really there. It is most obvious in the case of Peter, to whom the beloved disciple, on seeing the miraculous catch of fish and 'seeing further', is able to declare: 'It is the Lord'. The disciples on the road to Emmaus only fully appropriate the experience of encountering the Risen Christ after they have reflected on it together. It is in their recalling of how their hearts burned within them that they were able to begin seeing what had really been happening. Mary Magdalen and others, while seemingly recognizing him on their own in an appearance, do not long remain on their own; and their testimony becomes the basis for others' seeing and believing. Even Thomas, who seems in a special way to have needed to *see for himself*, was not without the companionship of the other disciples when the event of recognition took place. Seeing the Risen Christ often involves having him pointed

out in some way. And when disciples see him together (for example, Peter and the beloved disciple; the Emmaus pair; two or three gathered in his name today; the liturgical assembly), then he is seen more fully.

There is often need for observant directors to point out to people that Christ is alive to them in what they are initially not recognizing as his mediated touch in the relationships and circumstances of their everyday lives. There is awareness-in-companionship here: the director points out 'It is the Lord'. There was a retreatant who could neither move forwards nor backwards; she was in a 'damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't' situation. Attempting to sit with God in that immobile situation, all she could remember was how she had once protected her terrified child in a sudden, raging thunderstorm. The image of that day, and of her fierce maternal protecting, just would not leave her; but she could not figure out why and felt it was actually a distraction. The director gently suggested that, as she had been intensely and lovingly alive to her child in a tumult that had to be waited out, the same might be true for her now, with God being no less alive and protecting in her situation – even if nothing else was apparently being done to change it. And she began to see, to see that there could be intense life in the midst of death. Seeing that God was a God of life in this way brought several of the appearance texts alive for her and she began to recognize the living Jesus in many aspects of her, until now, seemingly deathly situation. Through what she had been to someone she loved, she began to 'see' God's presence, in the Risen Jesus, to the people he loved – in their very intractable situations. Her eyes were trained in that Fourth Week to recognize the Risen Lord, with the help of a companion. This happens (and not just in retreat situations). Another person, feeling that he had just completed a year in which God's love had been absent from his life, could not pray formally at all in the Fourth Week but, on walking, sitting, dreaming between prayer-times, would be reminded again and again of a friend who had accompanied him through the year. And suddenly he saw, in and through the visible friend given to him, the Invisible Friend who is always alive to him. With trained eyes many a retreatant leaves the Exercises, having completed the Fourth Week and having contemplated the Lord alive in all things in the *Contemplatio*, with at least the beginnings of an ability to glimpse God in all things; and what grace is this but to be able to proclaim 'It is the Lord' in a variety of situations? It is the gift of gradually, but surely, becoming a detective of grace – of the enabling touch of the Risen Christ in their own and in others' lives. It is a grace given in togetherness (with the

director, with others) and a grace facilitating togetherness, just as seeing the Risen Jesus bound his disciples together.

A change of mood and direction

Another feature common to many of the post-resurrection appearances is that they result in a marked change of mood – and in the beginnings of a change in direction also. The change in mood is from sadness to joy and the change in direction follows from this. When reflecting on these changes I will depart somewhat from the procedure used in the previous three sections of first examining the appearance texts and then exploring what might be termed, in some way, contemporary parallels. The reason I must tread slightly differently here is that the *joy* that characterizes the mood-change and motivates the change in direction is not simply a fourth feature added to the list of attitude transformation, recognition and companionship. Rather it is a pervasive reality that suffuses them all. Furthermore, the text of the Exercises gives a specific meaning to *joy* as the grace of the Fourth Week and this meaning must receive as much attention as is given to whatever can be gleaned about joy from the appearance-texts. Also, since a recent writer has made some important points concerning Fourth Week joy, a glance at his work will be appropriate. But first – not to depart from the usual procedure altogether – let us look at the appearance-texts in the New Testament.

They make much mention of joy. The Emmaus disciples, who had been downcast, leave the inn full of joy and return to Jerusalem (Lk 24:32, 41). Peter, intent on the big catch of fish, turns completely from this and wades to shore in a burst of joyful enthusiasm that is almost comical (Jn 21:7). Thomas, doubter of doubters, sceptic *par excellence*, utters a prayer of faith that we still gasp at today (Jn 20:28). On receiving the news that he is risen, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary are ‘filled with awe and great joy’ (Mt 28:8) and run off quickly to tell the disciples. Precisely where there had been sadness and inertia, there is now joy and forward movement; the joyful disciples cannot sit still. The good news of the resurrection gives wings to the feet and hope for the future.⁶ Also, the really remarkable thing is that these changes grow out of the very situations that seemed to offer least hope for the future: life emerges out of death – not abstractly, but in particular, concrete circumstances.

But what of today? Does the joy that Ignatius asks the person doing the Fourth Week to pray for relate in any way to the joy experienced by the disciples? Ignatius asks the retreatant to pray for ‘the grace to be

glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord' (Exx 221). The joy brought about in the disciples on seeing the Risen Jesus changes *them*, first their mood, then their actions. The Gospel texts do not speak about a joy in Christ's joy. But the text of St Ignatius does. Brian O'Leary sees the joy it refers to as a 'selfless joy' in which the person who rejoices does so simply because of the joy of the beloved.⁷ So it seems then that, in the various New Testament appearance texts, the joy is something *for the disciples*, whereas in the Fourth Week contemplations (on the appearance texts) the joy in the disciples is *for the Lord*, because they are happy for him, risen and glorified. Are we talking about two joys, then, and is what Ignatius is seeking for the Fourth Week exercitant essentially different from what the disciples receive from the appearances of the Risen Jesus?

I do not think so; for what the disciples receive for themselves makes them selfless and what those doing the Fourth Week receive for the Lord benefits them by drawing them close to him. Let us look first at the joy of the early disciples. It is intense; it sometimes flabbergasts them; occasionally it makes them want to hold on to Jesus. So he sends them out. The movement is outwards because their tendency, having walked with the earthly Jesus, is to 'earth' him again; but now he is risen, triumphant, missioning ('do not cling . . . go and tell . . .'). So he instructs the disciples not to dwell on themselves but to be for others, to go out, to trust in and spread the good news. Once they have grasped this, and selflessly look outwards, they receive, in their definitive missioning (Mt 28:19–20), what will sustain their own selves also: 'And know that I am with you always, yes to the end of time' (Mt 28:20). There is no sharing in the Risen Christ's mission without being in Christ risen (thus the disciples); and there is no being in Christ risen without sharing in his mission (thus persons of the Fourth Week – and decidedly so, following the *Contemplatio*).

The persons for whom Ignatius is writing are in a similar, but not identical, situation to the original disciples. They have undergone a dynamic: shame, confusion – and graced forgiveness – for sin (First Week); intimate knowledge of Jesus and a decision to follow him (Second Week); but then (in the Third Week) the awful but necessary realization that this decision is to be lived out in a sinful, indeed crucifying, world in which those who will follow the Lord must be prepared to endure at least elements of what happened to him. By the end of the Third Week there is stark realism about the decision made at the end of the Second. This decision still stands – in that sense the Fourth Week person is in a less confused state about mission than the

early disciples were after Jesus' death – but it has been shaken. If it is to truly stand, the willingness to suffer and so to follow into glory the Eternal King of the Kingdom meditation (see Exx 95) must be deepened; and for this deepening an experience of the resurrection is needed, an experience in which the person is assured that Jesus is alive. Such an experience will have to involve assimilation into Christ risen. That is why the grace sought in the Fourth Week is joy in Christ's joy. Those who love rejoice simply in the good fortune, the glory, of the beloved. This is selfless, but not without many benefits both to those who receive it and to those who receive from them. For to be given the gift of loving thus is to receive new eyes – and to receive the eyes of the Risen Christ is to see the world anew and to be enabled to live in it according to his Spirit.

Concluding remarks

From all that has been said in these pages it should be possible to see that the experience of the early disciples and contemporary experience of the resurrection are indeed similar in form or structure – and should be expected to be similar in a community of believers in which the living Jesus has always been at the centre. The reflections here have as their foundation a contemporary theological approach that sees Christianity as built upon a faith-experience, not just a faith-experience of original disciples *back then* but also an analogous faith-experience of contemporary disciples *today*.⁸ However, St Ignatius, without ever having had access to such a theology, exemplified a type of it nonetheless in his emphasis, really, on experience: on the experience of rejoicing intensely 'because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord'. He knew – and he did not get this knowledge from the arid scholasticism to which he was subjected in sixteenth-century Paris – that Christian faith was heart-felt and not just head-felt and that sustained discipleship was impossible without radical closeness to the Lord who had lived, died and risen. He would have stopped at the end of the Second Week of the Exercises if he were not looking for the more, the *magis*, that would draw the person beyond simply attending to Jesus in the Gospels and asking questions about him and even deciding to follow him to a being-in-him, after the pattern of Galatians 2:20 ('I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me'), so that the person could truly view the world with his eyes and live in it as he did. I am reminded of Peter's 'neither silver nor gold' remark in Acts 3:6. Enlivened by Christ's Spirit, he knew the riches he had: the power of Christ within, which is intimacy, and the gift of Christ to share, which is mission.

Similarly the one who has shared Christ's joy in the Fourth Week and marvelled at God working in all things in the *Contemplatio*: this person has become a companion of Christ sharing his work in the world.

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NOTES

1 Edward Schillebeeckx sees these traditions as following from a conversion experience that the disciples underwent. They must have had an intense experience of being forgiven, he argues, in order to have been drawn together again after Jesus' death and to have begun saying the kinds of things that became the basis for what we now know as the empty tomb and appearance traditions (see *Jesus: an experiment in Christology* (London: Collins, 1979), pp 379–397, especially 390–392). In this view, the appearance tradition is an attempt to convey that a transforming grace was received that gave new life and energy to the disciples. The stories follow whatever it was that happened to the disciples and convinced them that Jesus, whom they had seen die, was really alive.

2 See, for example, Luke 24:37–41 (which depicts the Eleven moving from alarm and fright, agitation and doubt . . . to dumbfounded joy); also v 45 (the Risen Jesus has to open their minds so that they can understand the Scriptures, just as he did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus); also Acts 26:12–23, where Paul tells King Agrippa what happened to him when the Lord appeared to him (1 Cor 15:8) on the road to Damascus.

3 See Brian O. McDermott, 'With him, in him: the graces of the Spiritual Exercises' in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* XVIII:4 (September 1986), pp 15–17. However I am aware that, by going this route, I shall have to leave unaddressed a number of the hermeneutical questions that arise in the effort to relate original events and contemporary experiences.

4 See Brian O'Leary, 'The joy of the Risen Christ: the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises' in *Review of Ignation Spirituality* xxx, ii (1999:91), pp 42–44.

5 Brian O. McDermott (*op. cit.*) also emphasizes, when discussing the Fourth Week, how the Risen Lord's being alive can be mediated to persons by their own core identity (p 23). However, drawing on Karl Rahner here, he focuses on the person's *graced transcendence as such* as that which mediates the Lord's aliveness in an experience of God that he says has 'an aspect of immediacy and an aspect of mediation' (p 23). I do not disagree, but I am not trying to show (as he is) that 'the disciples' Easter experience dovetails with the experience of consolation without preceding cause as St Ignatius portrays it' (p 21). It may well be true that the described dovetailing occurs and even characterizes – if one may say this – the highest form of the Fourth Week experience. Nevertheless I place the stress on concrete-historical, biographically significant mediations (on the categorical realm, in Rahner language) that will be present as objects of consciousness (unlike our self-transcendence) because these seem to me to be the more usual mediations disclosing the Lord's aliveness in personal life. I justify this emphasis also by bearing in mind the (now well known) criticism of Rahner that he tended to overlook, in his theological project, the significance of *particular* history and the role that it plays in shaping core personal identity.

6 See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *See that which is above* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p 65.

7 Brian O'Leary, *op. cit.*, pp 46–48.

8 See Schillebeeckx again – both *Jesus and Christ* – and note what Louis Dupré quotes from Schillebeeckx's *Interim report on the books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p 50: 'Christianity is not a message which has to be believed, but an experience of faith which becomes a message, and as an explicit message seeks to offer a new possibility of life experience to others who hear it from within their own experience.' Dupré's article is 'Experience and interpretation: a philosophical reflection on Schillebeeckx' *Jesus and Christ* in *Theological Studies* 43:1 (March 1982), pp 30–51. The quote is from p 31.