

# Resurrection faith in the midst of grief

Where is the one that I love?

*Janet K. Ruffing*

**M**ANY RETREATANTS BRING MYRIAD FORMS OF LOSS, disillusionment and grief to their experience of the Fourth Week of the Exercises whether or not the retreat takes place in daily life or in the enclosed retreat. Moreover, when a directee is still psychologically near the tomb, deep in mourning or attempting to carry on with life after profound discouragement or disillusionment like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, this encounter with the newly 'Living One' may emerge for directees during the Easter season in ongoing spiritual direction in ways reminiscent of and similar to the contemplations of the Fourth Week. The grace of grief may be surprising, confusing, and profoundly consoling in the context of the resurrection faith promoted in the Fourth Week of the Exercises.

## *Paradoxical presence and absence*

Within the structure of the Spiritual Exercises, the Fourth Week in which the key contemplations include the resurrection narratives and the Contemplation to Attain Love often gives rise to a strange paradox for retreatants. After all, the only Jesus experienced by the retreatants throughout the retreat is, of course, the Risen One. The entire retreat is designed to facilitate a profound encounter with the Second Person of the Trinity who offers the retreatant God's unconditional love and forgiveness and invites him or her into ever deepening intimacy through call and discipleship. The Third and Fourth Weeks intensify this intimacy for many through a deeply unitive experience of the Christ as he labours for our salvation, suffering the consequences of human sinfulness and evil. If the retreatant has received the graces sought in the first two weeks of the Exercises, she or he enters into these last two weeks from a posture of committed discipleship. In Week Three the retreatant often receives an intimate experience of Jesus' personal love. Because this love is fully known and experienced in the context of Christ's suffering, self-donation, and unconditional offer of

love and relationship, the transition into the Fourth Week may be characterized at first by an experience of loss. The mode in which this initially unitive experience took place is shattered by the shift into the contemplations on the resurrection. The 'change' in Jesus, as the power of God is manifested in him in the resurrection event, may make Christ appear to the retreatant suddenly too cosmic, too divine, and beyond human reach. In the mode of resurrection, which, of course, paradoxically has been the mode of experiencing Jesus through the entire retreat, the mystery of the person of Christ enlarges to cosmic and universal dimensions. This Christ cannot be confined even by death, let alone by an exclusive personal relationship with the retreatant. Despite a desire for self-transcendence and the longing to accompany the Risen Christ empathetically in this new mode of existence for him, this accompaniment may initially elude the retreatant. John English perceptively commented on this phenomenon many years ago in *Spiritual freedom*.<sup>1</sup> He recommended using the story of Mary Magdalen as a way of initiating the Fourth Week because it begins in her grief and clinging to the familiar mode of presence and gradually moves towards discovery and joy. If, however, the retreatant brings to these contemplations a personal experience of grief, disillusionment or bereavement, the experience of this week may be quite muted, but nonetheless consoling in quite particular ways.

### ***Grief and resurrection faith in the New Testament***

A grieving or disillusioned retreatant may find strong echoes of his or her intimate pain in the resurrection stories themselves. The New Testament narratives dramatically show that in the early Church, the resurrection challenged the community of disciples as a group and one by one, and eventually constituted it as the Church and sent it on mission. This development required each of them, singly and together, gradually to embrace resurrection faith after the initial shattering of their Jesus-inspired dreams and hopes for the reigning of God in their midst. The disciples also suffered the loss of Jesus' personal presence in all the familiar ways which had enlivened their hope and kindled their personal love for him in a more intense way than through a natural death because of his state execution. Embedded in the scriptural narratives are their initial reactions typical of grief and mourning – numbness, fear, anxiety, emptiness, hopelessness, discouragement, an altered sense of one's world, active weeping, differently gendered responses related to care of the corpse and burial, seeking the company

of others or isolating oneself, the discounting of experience by others, and attempts to escape the whole nightmare by leaving town.

For example, Mary Magdalen in John's Gospel is portrayed as an archetype of female grief and is addressed not once, but twice with the question, 'Why are you weeping?' (Jn 20:13 and 15). The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35) contains the dynamics of social desolation – the loss of the dream for a new and more just social order. As the disciples say, 'We had hoped' (Lk 24:21). In another account, the women 'told no one, because they were afraid'. In these narratives, the emotional starting point of the disciples after Jesus' death is that of incompletely resolved grief, disillusionment and distress. These are feelings which directees may bring to the contemplations of the Fourth Week.

Both the liturgical celebration of Easter, which frequently coincides with the Fourth Week of the Exercises in the retreat in daily life, and the grace desired for this week may appear to require directees who are mourning or suffering social desolation to identify with Easter joy prematurely. The grace sought in the Fourth Week according to the Third Prelude is 'to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord' (Exx 221) and the retreatant is asked to shift attention to Christ's divinity rather than his humanity (Exx 223). Additional notes for this week emphasize cultivating an affective state of joy and happiness. 'As soon as I awake, to place before my mind the contemplation I am to enter upon, and then to strive to feel joy and happiness at the great joy and happiness of Christ our Lord.' In order to intensify this joy further, the sixth direction enjoins the retreatant 'to call to mind and think on what causes pleasure, happiness, and spiritual joy; for instance, the glory of heaven'. And finally the seventh encourages the retreatant 'to make use of the light and the pleasures of the seasons . . .' (Exx 229). By this time in the process, creation itself and the pleasure of the senses, especially as spring blossoms to life, may all serve to deepen an almost cosmic jubilation in profound empathy with the joy of the Risen Christ. That is, if one is neither bereaved nor depressed.

### *The office of consoler*

For these retreatants, the process of experiencing the 'Living One' may centre more on the fourth point, 'consider the office of consoler that Christ our Lord exercises, and compare it with the way in which friends are wont to console one another' (Exx 224). The place of entry into these mysteries may well be the retreatant's willingness to allow

the Risen Christ to accompany him or her in this place of grief and mourning precisely as consoler. To do so requires emotional honesty, self-presence and acceptance of the painful feelings associated with the particular loss. The mystery of Christ's resurrection may not immediately yield joy with Jesus in glory. The pain of loss may evoke in some of these retreatants disbelief in or resistance to this mystery because their bereavement may leave them wondering about where their beloved is. Is the beloved really with Christ in anticipation of personal resurrection? Or what? Or does this mystery seem like an 'idle tale' made up to assuage the emptiness of overwhelming loss? The resistance may run very deep both emotionally in uncomfortable ways and theologically as faith itself may be threatened.

Even more challenging will be those who discover sharp unknown pain unexpectedly erupting as these retreatants attempt to enter into this mystery of resurrection faith. These, too, may find intriguing forms of consolation emerging as they allow their buried pain to surface and be touched by the Risen One.

As twenty-first-century believers, retreatants may initially overlook how challenging, even 'threatening', the event of Jesus' resurrection was. We and our directees read the gospel narratives knowing the end of the story. We and they often think we know where we ought to be and how we ought to feel. If, however, as directors, we can invite retreatants creatively and imaginatively to fill in the content of the stories with their own, retreatants may experience an appropriate and profound sense of the consoling presence of Jesus in and through the ambiguity and mystery of resurrection which solidifies the graces of the entire retreat. These are subtle movements, hope in the face of despair, a spontaneous movement of the heart in response to the signs of new life in nature engendering trust in the life-process, perhaps simply the willingness to allow grief or disillusionment to rest within the mystery of the promise of new life born in Christ's resurrection. Although such subtle shifts may seem insufficient to both director and retreatants because of the underlying fear, sadness, depression or anger, nevertheless, these are not insignificant movements towards transcendence and may deeply support the retreatants' mourning process as they discover the Risen One gently consoling and accompanying them in their valley of darkness. This initial experience of the consoler may subsequently open the way to surprising transformations and resolutions, even shared joy eventually.

*Some of the graces of grief and desolation in the Fourth Week*

This example from Diane Clark, a Protestant doctor of ministry student, illustrates both the difficulty of making the transition from Week Three to Week Four because of intense intimacy and identification with the suffering Jesus and also the emergence of unresolved grief through the contemplations of the Fourth Week. She writes:

After an intense and prolonged Holy Saturday experience . . . the contemplation of . . . Christ's appearance to his mother . . . presented me with a dilemma. By this time, I felt an intense closeness to Mary as a mother who had shared the most formative experience of my life, the death of her child. Because I found immense consolation in this, I was concerned that, if I joined Mary as she met her living son, the bond would be damaged since I could not share that part of the experience. I also thought her joy would intensify my pain beyond endurance . . . Since there is no scriptural narrative about a resurrection appearance to Mary, I decided to skip this and move on.

Unfortunately, my subsequent prayers were completely dry. I simply could not image a resurrected Christ. There was no joy in prayer, only the continuing grief and emptiness of Holy Saturday. Even after my director gently suggested that it might be helpful to consider making rather than avoiding the contemplation, I was unable to face the prospect of accompanying Mary while she saw her son alive when mine is dead. Why should she know this joy while I have to continue to live with the pain?

Fortunately, I was given the grace to recoil in horror at what I had just said. It was difficult to accept that I would begrudge a grieving mother the opportunity to see her child again, even if I did so only in imagination. The prayer had revealed a degree of bitterness, pettiness and meanness within me that I had not thought myself capable of.

[Awakened during the night, she began to pray, receiving an inner vision.] Last night, I saw Joel. He wasn't the wee son I buried, but the young man he'd be now. Still, there was no mistaking him: he had the big brown eyes all the Clark children have. I recognized him right away.

'Hi, Mom,' he said simply. I asked the usual motherly questions about whether he was all right. He was. Then I asked him why he had come.

'Mom, remember how you used to call me your angel when I was a baby?' I nodded. 'Well, I've come to be your angel. I have a message to you from Christ.' I composed myself to listen.

He said I was making a great mistake in clinging to my dead baby because he was alive in Christ. I told him that was cold comfort when every fibre of my body wanted to hold him. He replied I could hold him in every baby I baptize, in everyone I love with the passionate, unconditional, life-affirming love I once gave him.

He also told me there is a place of bitterness inside me that has been there ever since his death – a hard, dead, impenetrable place untouched by Christ's love though the rest of my grief has healed. He showed me how I have sealed this spot up tight like a tomb to keep the pain inside and said that Christ wanted to bring new life from this dark place but that I had to let the tomb be opened. He urged me to let go of my bitterness and to let Christ rise within me. Only then could I know the joy of resurrection.

After I asked him to thank Christ for sending him to me, he turned to leave. It was a tough moment, to silently let him go, but I felt surprisingly peaceful as he walked away.

[The following day, she contemplated Mary and Jesus in imaged prayer.] At Shiva, I was scrubbing floors for Mary. She started to cry so I held her hand and listened while she sobbed out the mother's grief she knew we shared. She asked me to speak of my grief so she would know what to expect.

Wanting to spare her needless anxiety, I simply said that it was very painful, but the pain eased over time. She asked if my grief had brought me closer to God. I said it had. Then she remarked that my grief also kept me from God. I replied that I had only recognized that since watching her son die.

When I offered to pray for her, she said she would pray for me too, and added jokingly, 'even if you are a Protestant'. Then we were both silent.

After a few moments she looked at her door and I followed her gaze. Christ was there! He walked in and greeted her. As she scolded him for putting her through such grief, he looked at her affectionately, hugged her and said, 'I love you, too, Mom'. She beamed at him like any proud mother.

After speaking intimately with Mary for a long time, Christ came and sat beside me. I told him I was grateful for his message. He said that if his dying had brought me face to face with the dead part in me, it was worth it. He could only give me a new life by pruning that dead part.

In the colloquy that followed, Christ asked me whether I would wish to have Joel alive again on this earth. With a calm and assurance

that surprised me, I answered, 'No. I understand now that his life is complete and he lives in your love. That is enough for me.' At that moment I knew that I was at peace with Joel's death as never before.<sup>2</sup>

This abbreviated account of two key movements in the Fourth Week is highly suggestive for a number of reasons. The Fourth Week contemplations on the Easter experience unexpectedly evoke a hidden aspect of Diane's grief process which, through the retreat process, becomes available for healing. Her resistance to the contemplation of Jesus' appearance to Mary is overcome through her prayer vision, in which her dead son appears to her from some place of new life. It is only after she recognizes her surprising 'bitterness, pettiness, and meanness' that she becomes receptive to fresh grace, both of forgiveness and healing. Her son's appearance in her vision is the age he would have been at the time of Diane's retreat and not the age when he died. He comes to her both as a messenger from Christ and perhaps even as a disguised form of Christ, like the gardener with Mary Magdalen. This vision names her particular resistance to grace – the part of her which died when her son died and which she has not been able to let the love of Christ touch. She learns she cannot enter into resurrection joy – 'let Christ rise within me' – until she is willing to let Christ into this tomb of her heart. Diane's desire and need to touch and hold her son is symbolically extended to the living body of the community she is to serve through ministry – 'every baby I baptize, everyone I love . . . with the love I gave him'. The grace emerging from this deep grief unfolds both as personal healing, receptivity to the consoling presence of Christ, and as clarification about her calling. She begins to experience a confirmation of her call to ordained ministry and subsequently in the retreat, an affirmation of her poetic gifts. The movements are all of a piece – the release of new life for Diane and through Diane for others. The imaged prayer which followed the vision of her dead son, now alive in Christ, enabled her to receive this consolation through both Mary and the Christ. Her imaged prayer connects Jesus' redemptive death for her to its present moment of grace, healing her 'dead part'.

Diane's grief is deeply personal, yet she found through it solidarity with Mary who also grieves for a dead child. That solidarity of maternal grief might well eventually open her to all other mothers who suffer untimely bereavement, such as the mothers of the disappeared. Diane's consoling grace required great courage on her part to recognize her resistance to the contemplations of the Fourth Week and to accept the

uncomfortable feelings which shocked her at their release. But her bitterness – perhaps an anger never fully released which is quite common in the bereavement process – becomes accessible to transformation.

Every grief is particular; retreatants have lost friends and lovers, parents and siblings. They are embedded in a vast and complex web of relationships and their joys, disappointments and particular griefs. The whole gamut of feelings related to them may either facilitate or hinder the breakthrough of God's personal love for them in the course or retreat. In this Fourth Week, too much insistence on joy will not help these retreatants. For some, music from the Easter season which embodies both the poignancy and the gradual breakthrough of joy and self-transcendence may help. African-American spirituals are full of both the pain of oppression and the struggle for life all centred in the Christ mystery. During this transition into the Fourth Week through tears, Marty Haugen's 'Song of the empty tomb' expresses, in the minor key of a traditional ballad, Mary's distraught grief, capturing the shattered world and disturbed hopes in the stark experience of loss which is so often palpably physical in its ache.

Where now is the body I love?  
 What is this dark and deep hole?  
 Where is the one that I love?  
 Where is the fire of my soul?<sup>3</sup>

Other verses voice the gradual possibility that this loss is not irrevocable – that 'Here in the midst of death/We shall see the Risen One'.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the grief experience is gentler, and the complex way Easter music might affirm the grief yet also evoke a profound, consoling accompaniment in immediate grief is open to many possibilities. The lyrics of another contemporary Easter song evoke the Risen Jesus in both his absence and presence in the chorus:

Here I am, standing right beside you –  
 Here I am, do not be afraid.  
 Here I am waiting like a lover.  
 I am here, here I am.<sup>5</sup>

The verses to this song focus on resisting fear and recognizing Jesus' new presence in the midst of any human love as well as in the midst of



any human trial. The words are placed in Jesus' own mouth and vividly evoke the 'I AM' texts of John's Gospel as well as the Johannine insistence that God is love. A retreatant who hears the Risen One singing this song to her could be profoundly consoled by the immediacy of Jesus' accompaniment through grief and care for others, 'standing right beside' her and also 'waiting like a lover'. She might experience the immediacy of Christ's presence to her in her fear, loss and pain as well as in all those who continue to offer her love and care within the human family.

When the pain is less interpersonal, overt anger or covert bitterness such as Diane's might transmute unhelpfully to disillusionment or social desolation. This is especially so because of the oppression which is experienced by many, including women in the Church, long-time justice workers, and men and women of colour. The resurrection narratives contemplated as part of this Fourth Week may evoke these feelings, too, because they are prominent in the texts before and after the appearances. For example, in all three Synoptic Gospels, either men or angels charge the women who come to the tomb to anoint the body and prepare it properly for burial to go and tell the disciples about this resurrection and that Jesus is alive. The reactions of these women are most varied. In Matthew (28:7-8) they depart quickly both *fearful* and joyful to find their brothers. In Mark, which offers two different versions, they 'went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one; for they were afraid' (16:8). In the second version, in which Mary Magdalen does go to those 'who had been with him, they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it' (Mk 16:10-11). Likewise in Luke, the women return and 'told all of this to the eleven and to the rest'. These women are identified by name, Mary Magdalen, Joanna and Mary the mother of James, 'but these words seemed to them [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:9-11). In all of these texts the male disciples believe only on the basis of their own experience. The women's testimony does not influence them. When women encounter these texts, they may well discover their present church reality mirrored more clearly than they want. Even professional women have plenty of experience of having their testimony and opinions negated. This pain may emerge sharply in the contemplations.

But along with that pain, the undeniable religious experiences of their lives may be affirmed and they themselves strengthened and consoled anew through these contemplations. Jesus does appear

directly to the women in all four Gospels. They are the first to recognize and believe. They are emboldened to overcome their fear, grief and anger in the joy of presence and the unmistakable empowerment they experience. Each retreatant's imagination and life story will interact with these narratives in complex and surprising ways if the negative emotions are not denied but allowed to surface, accepted and recognized as a necessary part of the journey of transformational change. Both directors and retreatants need to be willing to recognize that grace, even consoling grace, can be not just uncomfortable but terrifying when it turns the world upside down.

Julia Esquivel captures a profound aspect of this perplexing mystery in her poem 'They have threatened us with Resurrection'. In the context of the murdered and disappeared of Guatemala, she evokes the terror these dead, now living in Christ, strike into the heart of the still living who are responsible for their deaths. Resurrection threatens because it is a judgement on our injustice, the way things ought not to be. Those who die as a result of that oppression and injustice

. . . have threatened us with Resurrection,  
because they are more alive than ever before,  
because they transform our agonies,  
and fertilize our struggle,  
because they pick us up when we fall.<sup>6</sup>

Resurrection faith in the midst of grief is a complex and unpredictable affair. When retreatants enter the Fourth Week in the midst of bereavement or social desolation, the Fourth Week can be experienced profoundly if the sadness can be welcomed and Jesus as consoler invited to touch the retreatant in ways unique to each person's story. This touch may be exquisitely gentle or quite challenging. It usually both strengthens and consoles. Resurrection faith invites retreatants to hope, to place their sorrows within this larger mystery, and to open themselves to the possibility that this present grief is not the end of everything but may itself be the occasion for intimacy with the Risen One and consoling in ways that only God's presence brings.

**Janet K. Ruffing RSM** is associate professor in spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University. She has published in numerous journals including *The Way*. Her most recent book is *Spiritual direction: beyond the beginnings*,

published by Paulist Press and St Paul's Press. She also edited *Mysticism and social transformation* to be published by Syracuse University Press.

## NOTES

- 1 John J. English, *Spiritual freedom* (Guelph, Ontario: Loyola House, 1973), pp 247–248.
- 2 James Bowler, formerly of Guelph, graciously shared this retreat account with me which appears in *Tearing the veil: a poetic journey toward wholeness*, Diane Lynne Elder Clark's doctor of ministry dissertation, St Stephen College (Edmonton, Alberta: np, 1998), pp 177–181.
- 3 Marty Haugen, 'Song of the empty tomb' on the recording 'Wondrous love' (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1990) v 3.
- 4 *Ibid.*, v 7.
- 5 Tom Booth, 'Here I am' (Portland, Oregon: Oregon Catholic Press, 1996).
- 6 Julia Esquivel, 'They have threatened us with resurrection' in Parker J. Palmer, *The active life: a spirituality of work, creativity, and caring* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p 145.