

Exploring Thomas Merton's Resurrection Consciousness

By **Fiona Gardner**

1. Introduction

In a February 28, 1959 letter to Czeslaw Milosz, Thomas Merton writes about resurrection consciousness – “life is on our side” – where the God whom we seek is not to be found in intellectually satisfying systems of thought but rather in the muddle and agony of a man being humiliated and executed.¹ Merton’s resurrection consciousness is full of the cross – struggles with despair, violence, dishonesty and betrayal, but a despair that Merton believes can lead to rebirth and the light of Christ, where the consciousness is an awareness that from the darkest times rebirth can take place. The dividing line between despair and faith can be a mere thread; when the soul is at the very edge of the abyss it can in an instant be snatched into safety. There need not be any long twilight separating darkness from dawn. The sun can suddenly arise, strangely and unexpectedly out of the most unpromising sky. Merton shows us how both faith and despair can be paradoxical and contradictory: to be human is to be many things, sometimes consecutively and sometimes almost at the same time – both the shadow and the persona; the false and the true self; wise and foolish; dead and alive; crucified and resurrected.

This exploration of Thomas Merton’s resurrection consciousness will focus initially on two of Merton’s central writings on the resurrection. Both were written over what looks like a five-week period from the end of August through early October 1967. One is an Easter homily, published posthumously in the small booklet called *He Is Risen*,² and the second the preface to the Japanese translation of his 1960 book *The New Man*,³ subsequently revised and published in *Love and Living* as “Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity.”⁴ The theology contained in both pieces of writing will be briefly discussed, but as Merton’s writing is nourished by personal experience I shall also draw on Merton’s journals to look at what was actually happening during the time that these pieces were coming into being. The suggestion is that the counterpoise of journal entries and the writing on the resurrection portrays a central dynamic found in resurrection consciousness that may prove helpful in our own spiritual development.

2. The Resurrection Is the Only Light:

Theological Insights from *He Is Risen* and “Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity”

William H. Shannon notes in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* entry for the “Resurrection of Jesus Christ”⁵ that the booklet-homily *He Is Risen* (based on Mark 16) is Merton’s most extensive reflection on the resurrection of Jesus.

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Fundamental to Merton's thinking is Paul's insistence that the resurrection is not simply an event that happened to Jesus; it is also something that happens to us in our own lives. The danger illustrated by the women coming to the tomb to look for what they can only think and imagine is a dead Christ is that Christianity can become, in itself, merely a cult of the dead body with implications for our own state of being half-dead or half-alive. It is the cross that makes the resurrection possible and Christ is not static but moves "walking ahead of us to where we are going" (HIR 5). This invitation, says Merton, is dependent on our willingness "to move on, to follow him to where we are not yet, to seek him where he goes before us – 'to Galilee'" (HIR 6). There are two things required of us: one is that we are called "not only to believe that Christ once rose from the dead . . . [but that] we are called to *experience* the Resurrection in our own lives by entering into this dynamic movement . . . This life, this dynamism, is expressed by the power of love and of encounter" (HIR 8).

Merton goes on to say that Christ leads us to a new future which we build together – the Kingdom of God which is at the heart of the Christian faith, and so the resurrection rather than merely being seen as historical fact, becomes the life and action of Christ in us through his Spirit. Above all else, resurrection consciousness has to be personal and real – where "True encounter . . . awakens something in the depth of our being, something we did not know was there" (HIR 14).

So resurrection is about liberation, power and hope. Merton adds that it is about a capacity and resilience in life to bounce back, to transform ourselves creatively even though we might feel defeated, and despite the battle between death and life that goes on within us. It is only through the cross that this renewal takes place, and this may involve disagreement, unpopularity and alienation from others, but each is called according to one's own purpose and grace. Merton writes of the Christian in whom Christ is risen, who "dares to think and act differently from the crowd. He has ideas of his own, not because he is arrogant, but because he has the humility to stand alone and pay attention to the purpose and the grace of God" (HIR 26-27). This may involve standing alone with Christ who liberates us from all forms of tyranny and domination.

Perhaps the most important section of the homily is when Merton writes that we are called to share in the resurrection not because we are religious heroes, but rather because "we are suffering and struggling human beings" (HIR 42). It is so hard for us to believe that Christ is risen; rather, as with the disciples and the women who went to the tomb, we secretly believe him to be dead, with a massive stone blocking the way that keeps us from reaching the living Christ. This, too, Merton thinks is what happens to our Christian faith – for Christ is not an inert object, not a lifeless thing, not a piece of property, not a super-religious heirloom. Instead, as Merton adds in capital letters towards the end of the homily – it looks as if he were shouting: "HE IS NOT THERE, HE IS RISEN" (HIR 57) and indeed is going ahead before us.

And where is he going? well, to Galilee, which is the place where the past can be recovered in such a way as to make it the foundation for a new and extended identity and "the soil on which a redeemed future may grow."⁶ So Galilee becomes the place of discipleship; and the path that leads from Galilee to Jerusalem is the path towards the place of suffering and death, but also to Jerusalem as the place of divine self-revelation. Here Merton understands that Mark is speaking of the way of the cross, so that if we are to meet with Jesus in Galilee then it is not necessarily some glorious, trouble-free existence, but rather a suffering discipleship, and an existence perhaps permanently characterized by human failure. But equally, as the Gospel implies but does not state explicitly, failure can be and is overcome because the power of forgiveness and restoration is in the end greater than

human failure and its consequences. Christ rises as the crucified one, and Jesus can only be “seen” and experienced by the way of the cross. This involves a letting go of the false self and the person we might like to be seen as, so as to allow a new consciousness to emerge. To understand Easter and to live it, we have to renounce our dread of newness and freedom and consent to new life, and then grace and trust are renewed from moment to moment.

As Merton tells us in the Japanese preface to *The New Man*, the idea of new birth “reveal[s] the inner meaning of Christianity” (“HR” 130). This is not merely a ritual affair or the result of exterior acts; rather it involves complete self-transcendence and transcendence of the usual cultural norms and attitudes, where all are seen as created, redeemed and loved – “we are also one” (“HR” 133). Merton saw this as the search for inner truth and as an inner transformation of consciousness, and importantly as both a psychological and spiritual rebirth, and it is this that is the goal of authentic maturity. Resurrection for Merton is in part a metaphor for contemplation, involving an inner revolution: “To be born again is not to become somebody else, *but to become ourselves*” (“HR” 131). He sees this as a deep spiritual instinct, an urge for inner truth that can be found through interior silence and contemplative prayer: it is “a continuous dynamic of inner renewal” (“HR” 133).

Rebirth involves a death, and so the dynamic of resurrection consciousness is a continuous earthly transformational pattern of dying and rising. For it seems as if the process is not one of ascent, but rather descent, and this involves going into the darkness to see the light. This movement between darkness and light that is so well illustrated in the relevant journal extracts, I am suggesting, provided at least in part an experiential basis for Merton’s writings on the resurrection that were coming into being over this same period.

3. Everything Has to Be Tested:

All Relationships Have to Be Tried . . . Passing through Apparent Despair

When Merton writes to Milosz that “Much in us has to be killed, even much that is best in us” (CT 58), he reaffirms the pattern of the resurrection story in that the way, the truth and the life lie on the other side beyond the destruction of the temple. Merton in his great openness to God was able to write to Milosz that this process involved an ongoing dynamic of destruction of who we think we might be and resurrection of what we are. The open mind, the open heart and the willingness to think, feel and accept what we are – it is only through such openness that our salvation can be worked out often with fear and trembling and with an awareness that the unknown threatens before it gives us real life.

What we find in the journal accounts of this period are this openness and frankness.⁷ At the end of August Merton writes about the continuation of what he calls “Great serious days” (LL 284). He acknowledges his ambivalence about the amount of mail and the pressure from people trying to talk him into something he’s not interested in; he is thoroughly sick of it all, feeling the falsity of much that he has had to comment on and his disappointment with the so-called Catholic renewal. He anticipates difficult and violent times both in the church and outside. “But the whole blessed thing adds up to a climate that is not healthy, smells bad. The air is gassy and polluted. I prefer the air of the woods” (LL 284). And Merton does take some long walks in the woods thinking again about his problems linked to staying at Gethsemani under his abbot, Dom James Fox.

He notes on September 7 that during the Mass he felt “strained and depressed” (LL 286), and later digests the news that Dom James is to retire, ironically in order to become a hermit. In the next

entry, on September 10, Merton lists his difficulties, “My more constant depression, disillusionment, realization that there are no structures and no projects worth hoping in, not within reach” (LL 286). There is the death of Merton’s friend the artist Ad Reinhardt, the collapse of the *Jubilee* magazine, and the ongoing problems of the monastery. This is a time of what Merton calls “special absurdity” (LL 286).

However a large part of the entry for that date details his experience with one Thompson Willett. A. L. “Thompson” Willett was the president of the Willett Distilling Company – a family-based business that used bourbon recipes as the basis of the whiskey they distilled, including one called “Old Bardstown.” It seems that Willett also held a number of other positions of prominence in the community: he was a member of the Nelson County Historical Society and, as emerges later in the journal, he was on the committee of what was then called the Merton Room. Merton writes about his visit to Willett on September 9 and returns to writing about it two days later, and again on October 2. It seems to be the central event over this time.

The account focuses on how deeply hurt Merton is by the very cold reception he is given when he visits the distillery, and how he was “for all intents and purposes thrown out.” He adds with a touch of humor, “This is a new experience, in recent years! Don’t remember anything like that since college days!” The experience was “implicitly insulting. As if I’d tried to rape one of his daughters or something” (LL 287). Merton wonders whether a monk whom he refers to as Fr. U., who had left the monastery shortly before, had been badmouthing him: “he causes trouble everywhere he goes . . . U. detests me from way back – ever since the novitiate, with the cold, self-righteous neurotic hate of a deeply frustrated being. And maybe he took occasion to express some ideas about me and what I’ve been doing! . . . He would do a thorough job of discrediting me” (LL 287). Merton feels “Wounded and perplexed” (LL 287), utterly rejected and betrayed, identifying with the oppressed and discriminated against whilst at the same time aware of what he calls the stupidity and contradiction of why he went to the distillery at all. He feels that it is something to do with the general confusion and conflict he feels and how he does not really know what he is looking for – all of which adds to the humiliation.

Later, after meditation, “a good one in an anguished way” (LL 287), Merton turns to the Bible, finding comfort in his reading for that day (Is. 44:21-22) and thanking God for it. He is also reading B. Traven, the elusive author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* amongst other works. Earlier Merton quotes, from one of Traven’s stories, a sailor saying, “I don’t need any paper. I know who I am” (LL 286). But after the relief of the meditation Merton also quotes, from an article in *Ramparts* magazine about Traven, the statement: “How terrible for life to force deceptions upon an honest man” (LL 288). With insight he notes the tendency for deceit to come out sometimes in despair in a self-defeating way.

Following on from the meditation and his reading, Merton has resolved to put the experience with Thompson Willett to one side, but it is clear that he is still brooding on what has happened when he comments: “A feeling of great violence is in the air everywhere. We are really on the verge of a blow-up” (LL 288). It is clear that he projects the aggression he is feeling right out into the world, listing nuclear war and civil war, and writes that “Something unparalleled and unspeakable is getting ready for birth” (LL 288). He thinks that life will not be comfortable for people like himself and he writes that it all depends where you happen to find yourself when people are throwing things and shooting guns. Implicitly referring back to the Thompson Willett situation, and also understanding

his own anger, he writes, “Everywhere you go you meet the eyes of truculent people and eyes say ‘You are one of the bastards we’ll be shooting tomorrow.’ (Beam [another whiskey seller] in his Bardstown store! Probably thought I was thinking the same of him.)” (*LL* 288).

Merton in these journal entries is suffering and completely clear about the need to acknowledge the inner destructive forces rather than disguising and pretending that they do not exist, which would be a false conformity. The “something unparalleled and unspeakable . . . getting ready for birth” is, I am suggesting, paradoxically linked to a resurrection. The upsetting experience that Merton has with the whiskey distiller is painful and humiliating because it belongs to the destruction of the limited self manacled to the past. But there is also a pain which belongs to the birth and creation of a deeper self. There are both sorts of pain: the pain of dying and the pain of being born.

For despite the consolation of the Isaiah reading Merton is not comforted, and in the next entry he writes how extremely painful and difficult the last couple of days have been. Yet because he has been through this before he understands that somehow there is value, and writes:

I can see the whole thing has been good – the kind of good anguish that squeezes and sweats a lot of nonsense out of you. But at one point I wondered if I were going to go crazy. Except: what would be the point of cracking up? What would it get you? There comes a time when one simply has to stand firm and face the fact of mistakes and wrongness and madness. I have felt a kind of anguished despair at the *hopelessness* of trying to make real sense out of anything. (*LL* 288)

Here Merton understands that the prelude to resurrection as we experience it in this earthly life is always hopelessness, the death of power and control. We are impotently chained to where we are and who we are, and in these circumstances any release to freedom and life seems to be on the level of sheer impossibility, verging on the defiance of the absurd. Merton sees this when he writes: “No matter where you turn you run into the blank, rocklike absurdity (this whole situation of T. Willett and Fr. U. and all that!) – the absurdity of social life” (*LL* 288-89).

As Merton rationalizes and tries to make further sense of this situation, he acknowledges his powerlessness. He justifies the visit by writing about how Thompson Willett *had* been urging him to call, asking why he did not come, and even offering to drive him over there. Merton says he had been rather cool about it all and conservative and thought it was all too much, but now thinks that Fr. U. must have told Willett about the monastic law: “the old business of stealthy egress and sin: and knowing Fr. U. I am sure he laid it on as thick as he could and persuaded T. I was committing a mortal sin by going over there. So then I ran into this implacable, angry man, ready to defend his whiskey with his life rather than give me a drop of it etc.” (*LL* 289).

Merton realizes that the truth was that he had no business going there – not that he sees it as a sin, but it was not part of his business or his vocation. Perhaps he had thought that having a drink and conversation would give some sort of relief from the inner problems mentioned earlier. Still hurt and angry about the whole business and still feeling betrayed Merton concludes: “no more visiting. You can’t trust people; and in any case I don’t want it or need it, it is only a distraction. Part of the trouble comes from taking the new-think too seriously and being ‘open to the world’ and all that: it can be pure nonsense. I see the whole pointlessness of it – and that adds to the absurdity” (*LL* 289). In that same entry Merton lists what he sees as other absurdities and includes a list of why it would make a lot of sense to leave the hermitage and Gethsemani and go to Chile. This proposal is immediately turned down by Dom James, as noted in Merton’s next entry, on September 14, the

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the day that he finishes writing his Easter homily, a project that he feels had been hanging over him for several weeks: “Did a poor job on the first draft but may be I can improve it before sending it to be typed” (LL 291).

The crisis of the Thompson Willett situation appears reconciled when Merton writes on September 18 about needing the quiet and the peace of the hermitage, and he acknowledges, “I . . . have been very foolish to create so much destruction for myself. Especially this idiot running around, when I am in town or away from the monastery for an hour or two. I do not remember any of it with pleasure” (LL 292). Irritated by a visit from the bishop the next day, and following that the sound of groups of lighted helicopters going back and forth in the dark making a terrible noise with some accompanying sonic booms, Merton concludes that entry with “More damn choppers!” (LL 293).

On September 22, Merton learns of the death of another friend, John Slate, who had been one of Merton’s classmates at Columbia University. When Merton needed help in setting up his literary estate he had turned to him for advice and Slate had visited Merton in April 1967. Merton writes to his widow on the day he hears the news to share his shock and sadness. Reflecting on Slate’s death, together with that of Reinhardt, Merton writes, “I had been thinking how all of us are pretty much on the toboggan slide.”⁸ In the journal he writes, “A brilliant day – warm, bright, early full day, trees have not yet begun to change, grass still green, the lake at St. Bernard’s field was deep blue. . . . I read the news of Slate’s death, around noon, and walked up and down in the sun trying to comprehend it. I know I too must go soon and must get things in order” (LL 293). This meditation he finds very effective.

Over the next few days, Merton starts to try to sort things out, but as he writes, “the avalanche of paper goes on” (LL 294). The entry for October 2, the Feast of the Guardian Angels, begins: “I love this feast. Hope my angel is not mad at me. Are you?” (LL 296). Drawing on psychological insights from the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, Merton begins to brood again about his position at Gethsemani. He notes the paradox and the ambiguities, deciding that he’s only there because of the guilt and force exercised by Dom James. And yet there is nowhere else to be or where he would want to go.

The ambivalence he then raises about the Merton Room seems to be affected by what happened with Thompson Willett who is on the relevant committee. Merton writes about the Merton Room, to which I have a silver key, and where I never go, but where the public go – where strangers are and will be. A bloody cuckoo’s nest. This becomes a *typical* image of my own stupid lifelong homelessness, rootlessness . . . the pretended “roots” at Gethsemani, where I am alien and where most everyone else is alien too. . . . A place where I store away endless papers, in which a paper-self builds its nest to be visited by strangers in a strange land of unreal intimacy. (LL 296)

Thinking about the meaning of the Merton Room he plays about with Bachelard’s use of the French word *demeure*, meaning rooms and houses – “demur? demure? De-mural. With and without walls. Glass walls looking over to the madhouse!!” (LL 297). In his reflections Gethsemani becomes the bad place where things have been messed and destroyed, frittered away, rotting and being fed to mice. Instead he wonders whether the anxiety that he has been feeling can be linked to the surfacing awareness that the Merton Room and all it contains is futile – even more alien than Gethsemani and not something that can survive: “A last despairing childish effort at love for some unknown people in some unknown future” (LL 297).

Merton questions the whole concept of monasticism as a form of liberation without which the whole thing is a lie. But is it there and does really wanting it to be there make a difference? He writes that these are situations that have to be lived and not merely reflected on, and yet “My living seems so haphazard, so open to unpredictable swings and veering, such risky emotion.” The Merton Room is where his papers live and the cell where he does not really live, where the work is more than himself. “There is still something I have not said: but what it is I don’t know, and maybe I have to say it by not saying.” Merton holds at this point to his work on *The Geography of Lograire* – finally the creation without self-consciousness and introversion: “It may be my final liberation from all diaries. Maybe that is my one remaining task” (LL 297).

It sounds at this point as if some sort of crucifixion/death/stripping away has taken place, but as with all human endeavors Merton finds himself returning at the end of this entry to his fury with Thompson Willett and his role on the M. Room committee. The break between them is in reality a deep break between Merton and his fans. “Their illusion of me is seen to be completely out of touch. They have trusted me in building something like a house I myself once built and then destroyed. I frighten them! Maybe I frighten myself! But there is no question that my world and the world of Thompson Willett have *nothing* in common. And neither of us wants to pretend” (LL 298).

The next day, October 3, celebrates St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and, it seems almost in preparation for the Japanese preface for *The New Man*, Merton writes that there *has to be* a deeper meditation that goes beyond dreams, beyond imagination, beyond biography and beyond psychology. Here Merton notes the danger of forgetting the interior person: “true unity comes from the discovery of a non-experienced self, an invisible, non-phenomenal, non-volitional, non-acting self, a self of liberty, a dwelling ‘in God’ who has no house. . . . this No-house with no-walls, the Abyss, not ‘where,’ not ‘which,’ but the Abyss (purely) is – God and self in one. Beyond (metaphysical) *Atman*” (LL 298). It feels as if in this entry Merton has moved out of the place of the cross into the resurrection space. He leaves the wide wound of the empty tomb of his deadening, despairing wondering about where to live, who to be and how to relate, including and especially to Thompson Willett – the everyday human frustrations – and once again in the midst of the hopelessness the impossible seems to happen. He is reborn into something that gives a glimpse of a newness of life. And I think it is this state of mind that allows him to then work and write the inspirational preface. He concludes with relief: “Glad to have finally got some work done. . . . Preface to Japanese translation of *New Man*. . . . an act of love and communion” (LL 299).

4. It is Christ in Us Who Drives Us through Darkness to a Light of Which We Have No Conception . . . in the Heartbreaking Effort to Be Honest in the Midst of Dishonesty (Most of All Our Own Dishonesty), in All These Is Victory

In some senses Merton’s writing acts as his observation platform, and surely these accounts described in the previous section offer heartbreaking efforts to be honest in the midst of dishonesty – including Merton’s own dishonesty. The dynamic of resurrection consciousness is ever present: the movement between crucifixion and resurrection, from Good Friday, through the emptiness of Holy Saturday, into Easter Sunday. Our experience of resurrection in this life is the result of the miracle when somehow, from a state of apparent hopelessness and suffering, there is a creation – a new state of mind through a power that is beyond us. What Merton does, and what is illustrated in the journal extracts, is that he feels and accepts the negativity, the deadness and the despair, and

in this there is victory. From this is the experiential basis for his work on resurrection and rebirth.

In acknowledging and accepting the terrifying strength of aggression and destruction, of jealousy, envy, malice – all shameful feelings – we accomplish something and contribute towards transformation. Carl Jung described it as integrating the shadow which is bringing what we would rather not know about ourselves into consciousness.⁹ Depth psychology shows that the breaking into consciousness of violence, cruelty and panic is a move, often an agonizingly painful move, towards personal integrity, towards inheriting the fullness of what we are. It is about becoming real.

It seems as if feelings of destruction and despair are opposed to God's nature – love, joy and peace. But if, as Merton writes in his work on the cross and the resurrection, Christ took upon himself all the horrifyingly destructive forces which lie latent in us all, when some small part of that agony becomes one's own, *then*, more than at any other time, one is with Christ and he is in us. It is about finding not the dead Christ stuck in the tomb, but the living Christ who on the road to Galilee offers the miracle of transformation, the conversion of destructiveness into life, of soul-destroying hatred into life-giving love, of despair into joy. In the darkness lies the hope. We can know the power of Christ's resurrection only if we also know the fellowship of his powerless sufferings.

The bringing into consciousness and accepting of our destructive force is redemption, and from the apparent deadness “we are accomplishing something of inestimable value for the community as a whole . . . we share in the liberating work of sin-bearing. . . . Christ in Gethsemane is representative of us all.”¹⁰ In knowing such distress Merton knows that the work of the Spirit is to reconcile who we think we are with what we really are and to introduce all of ourselves to the glorious liberty of the children of God. For to see things as they are is to see them as God sees them, and to experience the resurrection is always to be raised from the dead and is a fleeting glimpse of unimaginable mystery. The miracle of life itself, the potency to create what is new, is to be found precisely within the daily routine – it occurs to us as we are – with Thompson Willett, warts and all.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 57; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *He Is Risen* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975); subsequent references will be cited as “HIR” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, “Honorable Reader”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 127-36; subsequent references will be cited “HR” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 192-202.
5. William H. Shannon, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 386-88.
6. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982) 29.
7. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 283-99; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 302 [9/22/1967 letter to Mary Ellen Slate].
9. Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, vol. 9, part 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).
10. H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection* (London: Fount, 1983) 166-67.