

A New Set of Eyes

Matthew 28:1-10

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I took my car to the automatic car wash the other day—one of those places where you actually get out of your car and watch it get pulled along a conveyer belt through various wash and rinse cycles. The lobby of this particular car wash was a miniature store, stuffed with auto accessories and trinkets, presumably to encourage waiting patrons to purchase all sorts of things that they and their car probably don't need. Those aisles of bumper stickers, key fobs, and cup holders probably float the business.

My eyes took in a large wall display of air fresheners. Every shape and scent seemed to be hanging there on the racks. What possessed me to purchase one marked “new car smell,” I'm not entirely sure. I think it was half curiosity, since this hanging-cardboard-tree-from-a-mirror was only \$2.29, and half experiment, since my car doubles as a cafeteria, long ago having traded in its new car smell for the fragrance of Arby's and Subway.

I brought the air freshener home, opened it enthusiastically with scissors, put my nose in range of the tiny tree, and almost fell on the floor. By my reckoning, it was more putrid odor than fragrance. When I turned to my wife for independent confirmation, she wrinkled up her nose after taking a whiff and said almost angrily, “That's awful. It's like cheap men's cologne gone bad.” You don't need advice from me today, but I'm going to give you some anyway: stay away from “new car smell” air fresheners. They will only give your car the illusion of newness, and may actually stink it up more than you bargained for.

That little air freshener tree is on my mind as I think about our togetherness this morning. I don't know exactly what brought you into the fold of worship today. So, let me guess. Maybe it feels like the respectable thing to do at this time every spring. It can be a special moment of family togetherness for some of you, right? Even if you're viewing the service online this year, you may have dressed up in some fancy clothes you don't get many opportunities to wear. Maybe a voice within you has finally confirmed that dyeing Easter eggs was never meant to be a religious experience. Or, maybe you've shown up today because you haven't been around church for some seasons, and you don't want to give God or your friends the impression that you're not a believing kind of person. So, that's why you've stepped into worship. Or, maybe you walked in the door or tuned into our livestream today because you love being around church, and you couldn't wait to belt out the triumphant Easter hymns that are such a big part of the day.

Whatever brings you here, keep telling yourself that you want newness of life. You want an outlook that's new and an inner spirit that's new. Not the illusion of newness. Not a whiff of newness. Not some pretend newness. Not Christianity that you can hang from a mirror and inhale whenever your life stinks. No, you want a Lord who can help you become a totally new creature in Christ. You're seeking a Lord who will help you think differently, see differently, and become an even kinder

person than the self you might create on your own.

Now, if you cannot bring yourself to believe in the resurrection—that Jesus of Nazareth who told so many that he would suffer, die, and then return—if that’s something you’re not even sure you want to believe, there is a kind of popular religion available to you. You can always admire the *man* Jesus. You can live appreciatively of his moral example from his days of walking ancient Palestine. You can follow his teachings that appeal to you and reject those you find uncomfortable. He does ask that we make life better for the poor, and that we love our enemies, either of which can be a deal breaker for a lot of people.

On the other hand, if you believe that God raised this Jesus from the dead and that God breathed new life back into his corpse, then practically everything about your outlook on life can and should change! If you believe that this resurrection has implications for your life right now, there’s no more setting aside some of those unwelcome teachings of Jesus. There’s no limiting of his presence in your life to be just that of a pleasant moral example. Trusting in the power of resurrection requires that you look at life—specifically, your own life and its impact on others— from a whole new dimension.

I want to draw your attention to the opening of our Easter story from Matthew’s Gospel. As with the other Gospel accounts, there are some women who show up at the tomb early in the morning. In Matthew’s version, however, there’s no record of these ones showing up with fragrant oils and perfume to anoint the body of Jesus. We’re only told that they went to “see” the tomb. The Greek word here is one from which we get the word *theater*. They went to gaze upon or look at the tomb like spectators at a play. It could be that grief knocked them into a kind of stupor. Whatever the case, an earthquake strikes suddenly and an angel of the Lord descends amidst the rumble. The angel moves the weighty tombstone and then promptly sits on it.

Perhaps the angel sat on the stone to signal to the women its obsolescence. “You won’t be needing this again.” Or, maybe the angel sat there with arms crossed and a defiant look, as if to say, “Don’t even think of rolling back a stone that symbolizes all those impediments in your life that you should be putting behind you.” In truth, the angel tells the women not to be afraid because Jesus Christ himself has rolled away all kinds of obstacles that can stand between us and God. It’s the angel’s confident word that suggests those barriers that come between us and those we’re supposed to love are gone. Such is tucked into the angel’s four words: “Do not be afraid.”

What is Easter if it’s not the resurrected Lord rolling away all sorts of massive boulders that paralyze our lives? The stone of guilt. The stone of shame. The stone of indifference. The stone of laziness. The stone of arrogance. Name your stone! Easter has rolled it away! Don’t even think of trying to roll it back into the place where it was. The angel is telling the women and those of us willing to listen that we’re supposed to die to those obstacles that have crippled our lives for far too long.

The women went to the tomb to passively *gaze* at the burial site. The angel told them where to go to actively *see* Jesus.

Easter isn’t about the illusion of newness—a little Christianized air freshener to inhale whenever life gets stale. It isn’t some pie-in-the-sky, wait-til-you-die kind of newness. Easter is seeing the world around you and within you with brand new eyes. It’s seeing in a way that adds fullness to your life and richness to other lives.

So, if you’ve been accustomed to confining religion to primarily a set of beliefs, or

prayers, or rituals, or to-do lists, this is your day to revise that thinking. The Christian faith has everything to do with a particular way of seeing the world. Easter is your introduction to a new set of eyes. To be Easter people, excited about the new life available to us in Jesus Christ, we need eyes that see clearly. Eyes that have depth perception. Eyes that look beyond outward appearance. Eyes that can peek below the surface.

So, let me leave you with an image of the kind of eyes we get to have as Easter people who want more than some mere illusion of new life. Early in his career, philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff spent some time teaching at the Free University of Amsterdam. In a conversation he had with an obstetrician on the faculty at the time, the question arose as to how this physician taught prospective nurses to care properly for mothers whose babies were still-born or died shortly after birth. “I tell them,” said this physician, “that when you go into the room, you need two eyes. With one eye you have to check the I.V.; with the other, you must cry. I tell them one eye is not enough. You need two eyes.”¹

As Wolterstorff went on to explain, the first eye is the eye of the mind. It’s the eye of knowledge, discernment, and critical engagement. The same eye that a maternity unit nurse needs to use when checking an I.V. is also required in the worlds of business, law, music, arts, politics, teaching, engineering, and more. This is the eye that says No when No must be said, and Yes when Yes must be said. The second eye is the eye of the heart. This is the eye that weeps, says Wolterstorff, because the mother weeps. And the mother weeps because she loved her child. When things go awry in life, tears are the painful recognition that this is not how God intends for life to be.

Regardless of what you do with your life, you need both of these eyes: one that can see with knowledge, discernment, and critical engagement; and one that can see with compassion in a way that shares the pain and grief of others. To be overly focused on the first eye is to neglect compassion. To be overly attentive to the second eye is to miss out on clear thinking. The eye of the mind without the eye of the heart, says Wolterstorff, will bring on heartless competence. The eye of the heart without the eye of the mind will add up to mindless empathy.

To be Easter people is to see the world with a new set of eyes. Not as passive spectators at a theatre production. Not as people who treat their existing sight as “mere convenience,” to quote Helen Keller.² Easter is about seeing the world the way the women at the tomb began to see it once they encountered the angel. It’s after that encounter that they were able to set aside what was scaring them enough to see the resurrected Christ all around them. That’s when they realized that the obstacles of their past had been rolled out of reach. That’s when they became open to a future they could not control.

You don’t have to be smart or good-looking or wise to enjoy a life in Christ. You only need two eyes that will let you engage the world critically and compassionately. So, this Easter, don’t inhale the illusion of newness. Breathe in new life itself through Jesus Christ ... the one who rolls away every stone you didn’t think you could budge ... and who gives you eyes to see where you next need to go with your life.

Notes

1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, “You Need Two Eyes,” Calvin College Commencement, May 20, 2006.

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1933/01/three-days-to-see/371679/>.