

Easter Eyes

Luke 24:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 5:20-26

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There are some sights that ought to make a believer out of almost anybody. “A flame of fire out of the midst of a bush”¹ ought to do it and did, in the case of Moses. A flash of light from heaven knocked Saul of Tarsus to his knees in the middle of the road to Damascus, putting faith in his heart in the process. The scriptures are full of faith-evoking sights: a sea is parted; a leper is healed; a storm is stilled, and the people who are present for those events believe they are seeing the power of God at work.

Of all of the sights in scripture you would assume would give birth to belief, the empty tomb in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea ought to top the list. At first light, the women came, their hands full of funeral spices, the hems of their skirts wet with morning dew, their hearts heavy with sorrow, and “found the stone rolled away from the tomb.”² The big boulder sat, off to one side, jarringly out of place. (What if you crested a hill on Memorial Drive and came upon Stone Mountain sitting in the median?) The sight of the rolled-away stone ought to have made a believer out of everyone there. Surely, any minute now, one of the Marys will say to the other Mary and to Joanna and to the other women with them: “Look at the stone rolled away! Our beloved Jesus must be risen from the dead!” But no word of faith cracks the silence of the dawn.

According to Luke’s account of the events of the morning of the first Easter, neither the rolled-away stone nor the discovery that Jesus’ body was gone caused anyone present to believe. What the women saw evoked only perplexity.

When the two men “in dazzling apparel” appear, the women move from being merely perplexed to being petrified. They literally fall down on their faces with a holy fear. The angelic messengers are respectful of their fear. When they ask “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” they are not passing judgement; they are offering them a new understanding of reality. Leading the women down the corridors of memory, the messengers take them back to the earthly Jesus whom they had known and loved and followed. “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”³ “Remember”: It is neither a question nor a command; it is an invitation to claim the fulfillment of the promise of the resurrection, which they had heard from the very lips of Jesus.

Fittingly, Luke says nothing about the women’s reactions to the angelic messengers, only that “then they remembered.” There is no need. Their actions tell us that the power of remembering displaced the perplexity and fear moved them to faith and proclamation. They go from the graveyard to witness the power of God over death as those who have themselves experienced the glorious birth of belief in the heart of the darkness of death. They had been given the gift of Easter eyes. Nothing would ever be the same again.

To those who were not there and had been led from memory to hope, the testimony of the women was “an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”⁴ Until they experienced themselves the reality of the risen Christ, even the disciples who had known him best and loved him most continued to see everything through Good Friday

eyes.

Biblical scholars tell us that the empty tomb/rolled-away stone stories in the Gospels were written later than the testimonies in the epistles to the appearances of the risen Christ. Paul never refers to the Easter discovery of the empty tomb in his letters. Whether or not they had heard the stories, Paul and the early Christians with whom he corresponded believed in the resurrection because they had seen and experienced the risen Christ in their midst, not because Jesus' body was gone from the grave. It is not that the emptiness of the tomb is uninteresting in matters of faith; after all, the pile of linen cloths in the corner "amazed" Peter. It is that things like that are not enough to lead you to faith. You can't prove the promises of God by adding up pieces of evidence. You have to see before you can believe. Only Easter eyes can see.

Much of the time, even we who have loved Jesus and have tried to follow him all our lives look at things with Good Friday eyes. As a character in a Reynolds Price novel puts it, "Most days, we might as well be Helen Keller in a barrel."

Good Friday eyes aren't all bad. You can get by with them, but they won't let you live the hopeful, joyful life God intends. Good Friday eyes are capable of only limited vision. With them, you expect only what you consider possible and act accordingly. You see how they work in the women who came to the tomb that first Easter. Jesus is dead, isn't he? Grab the funeral spices for the body. Get handkerchiefs for your tears. There's sorrow ahead.

A member of my church gave me a wonderful book last year entitled *Morning Glory Babies*. It is the story of a community of Christians in California whose ministry is with babies who have AIDS. The author writes, "From the media perspective, death is the essence of the story about our children. 'A Moment of Sunshine in the Shadow of Death' was a typical headline from newspaper stories about us. When finishing a story about the arrival of a baby girl named Melissa, a television producer asked if his network could have an exclusive on 'the end of story.'" The Easter eyed founder of the community writes of his frustration: "For me the 'story' is that Melissa is beginning to walk or that she sings duets with David in an unknown language only babies understand."⁵

It all depends on what kind of eyes you are looking at things with. Sometimes even the eyes of love can't see straight. The ones who came to the tomb loved Jesus; they just couldn't for the life of them, see him for who he really was - the savior of the world, the conqueror of death. He had told them and they had heard every word, but they didn't, couldn't get it. Even love cannot see sometimes.

I have a friend who is a fine New Testament scholar. She is a highly respected professor in a seminary in another part of the country and writes wonderful books about Jesus and the stories he told. When she was offered her first job teaching in a seminary, she went to see her father to share with him her good news. "Do you think you know enough to do the work?" he asked. Sometimes, those who know us best and love us most are incapable of seeing us for who we really are.

I might as well warn you, a relapse to a pre-Easter way of seeing things will be very tempting the Monday morning after Easter. Racism will be running rampant across the world. The poor will still suffer. Assault rifles will be on sale at your neighborhood shopping mall, the homeless will still be homeless, the recession won't be over. The intensive care units will still be beehives of activity; automobile accidents will still happen, as will heart attacks and Alzheimer's disease. Children will keep on breaking their parents' hearts; parents will keep on letting their children

down. It will be tempting to go back to Good Friday eyes. You and I might not be able to see much that is hopeful with Good Friday eyes, but at least we have learned how to find our way around shadows.

Before you decide about tomorrow, I want to tell you that the best part of the Easter story is yet to come. The twenty-fourth chapter of Luke goes on to tell of how Jesus, risen from the grave, appears to two people on the road to Emmaus. He then appears to the eleven apostles and the women and the other believers in Jerusalem. In one way or another, according to gospel, the eyes of everyone who would receive the gift of his presence were opened, and they saw him for who he was.

The best part of the story is the promise that you and I don't have to figure out how God raised Jesus from the dead or feel guilty if we cannot. We don't have to go back to the graveyard and analyze the evidence and scratch our rational heads and try to convince ourselves that Easter makes sense. The best part of the story is that Easter faith is a gift from God.

When you're gathered with the community of faith, the risen Christ will come to you. When you are lost in darkness, he will come to you. When you can't see tomorrow for the tears in your eyes, he will come to you, as he came to others long ago. It has been so with every believer who has ever believed. When your need to believe is great, he will come to you. When shadows fall and all you can see is the cold, hard hand of death before your face, he will come to you. In the night shelter and the soup kitchen, he will come to you. In breaking of the communion bread and in the waters of your baptism, he will be made known to you. He will come to you in the rituals of liturgy and worship, but he will come to you when you least expect him, surprising you with the power of his presence.

I cannot remember where, but I read of a father who, one evening, got to playing with his daughter before supper. They chased one another around the dinner table playing tag. They laughed and giggled and when they sat down for dinner, he looked across the table at the smiling face of his daughter and said right out loud, "Surely, the Lord is in this place!"

Jesus lives today. May God bless you with Easter eyes to see him.

NOTES

¹ Exodus 3:2, *New Revised Standard Version*.

² Luke 24:2, *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ Luke 24:6-7, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁴ Luke 24:11, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ Tolbert McCarroll, *Morning Glory Babies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 127.