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Easter Sunday

**Destined For Joy**

Isaiah 65:19

In January of 2007 writers for *The Washington Post* magazine arranged an experiment in public taste and perception. They wanted to see how people in the DC metro subway system during morning rush hour would respond to an impromptu performance by one of the finest classical musicians in the world. The virtuoso violinist, Joshua Bell, agreed to play while standing in front of a bare wall at the top of an escalator as people were leaving the L'Enfant Plaza Station. He would be playing some of the most elegant violin music ever written on his three and a half million dollar instrument. Like any street musician the open instrument case was at his feet so that people could leave money if they liked the music. The concert began on a Friday morning at 7:51 a.m. with commuters filing past him on their way to work. The article summed up the response of potential listeners in these words:

In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run—for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look...There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch Bell, or the ones who gave money, from that vast majority who hurried on past, unheeding. Whites, blacks and Asians, young and old, men and women, were represented in all three groups.

But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away (Gene Weingarten, *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Joshua Bell's concert that day was an incredible gift of music that most people did not know how to receive. It did not fit into the world as they knew it. The fact that children wanted to stop and watch proves only that they had not yet been socialized into the world as it is.

We see a similar dynamic at work in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a gift that his followers do not know how to receive. When the women go to the tomb early in the morning they are shocked to find that it is empty. Then they are confronted by two men in dazzling clothes who announce that Jesus is risen. These messengers place the event in the context of Jesus' overall ministry by pointing out that this is precisely what Jesus had been talking about when he was still with them. If they remembered better what Jesus had said they would understand that the resurrection is the logical fulfillment of his mission. It fits the trajectory of his life.

But this insight does not help the remaining eleven disciples when the women report what they have learned. Luke describes the response of these grieving disciples in this way, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them (Luke 24:11)." This resurrection talk is a story that makes no sense because this is not the way the world is. In our world dead people stay dead. In our world history is shaped by those who know how to use the power of violence. The Roman authorities have just demonstrated how effectively they can use the power of violence to remove Jesus

from the scene. The case is closed. The story is over. Jesus' death is just one more historical tragedy in a long line of historical tragedies. That is the way the world is. If some women are mesmerized by reports of a resurrection, this proves only that they have not been adequately socialized into the world as it really is.

The mind-set of these disciples is like that of the exiles who are addressed in the 65<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. They have recently returned from exile and are trying to come to terms with the historical tragedy which confronts them. Their cities are in ruin and their land is devastated. The institutions on which they depended before the exile are in shambles. They have managed to rebuild the temple but it is only a shadow of what it had been before. Worst of all their diminished prospects have led them into bitter conflict as they fight among themselves over their rapidly shrinking resources. What has happened to them is what happens when people do not have enough wealth or military capability. They are becoming hardened as they adapt themselves to the world as it is.

But the prophet offers to this embittered people another narrative by which to understand their world. The prophet announces the coming of a new era in which their circumstances will be transformed. This new era will be a time when people can live long lives and be properly rewarded for their labor. It will be a time when natural enemies will learn to live in peace with one another. Relationships will be changed. Their broken city of Jerusalem will be changed from a place of despair to a center of joy. The prophet says, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people, no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it...(Isaiah 65:19)."

This is not the story of the world as it is. This is God's narrative. It describes the world that God is bringing into being whether we can see it or not. This is the narrative that the angelic messengers lifted up for the women at the empty tomb. When Jesus suffered violence on the cross without retaliating he emptied violence of its power. This narrative invites the disciples to go back to Jerusalem, the scene of the most painful historical tragedy of their lives, and to find there a place of great joy.

William Willimon recently described how God's resurrection narrative is at work in the historical tragedy that has been unfolding in Haiti. He writes:

On two mission trips to Haiti with undergrads, there was widespread agreement that the most disarming thing about the country was the laughter of the children, along with their raucous singing. How dare they sing when their life expectancy is so horribly short? Was their laughter an escapist respite from the unmitigated tragedy of their lives or a smart rebuke to our assumption that their lives are trapped in tragedy?

As darkness fell upon Port-au-Prince after the earth heaved that January night, people danced in the streets and sang hymns. On CNN Anderson Cooper was incredulous (*Christian Century*, March 23, 2010, page 12)."

These Haitians have something to teach us about the gifts we do not know how to receive. God's resurrection narrative tells us that we are meant for music and destined for joy.

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to the Reverend Julie Wells Blythe for bringing this article to my attention.