



NEXT

Where Do I Go From Easter?

Text: Matthew 28:1-10; John 21:15-25

At the Subway in Washington D.C.

It was 7:51 on the morning of January 12, 2007, and rush hour commuters were hustling through the L'Enfant Plaza Subway Station in the heart of Washington D.C. A young man in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and a baseball cap walked down into the station, and took up a position against a wall next to a trash basket. From a small case at his feet, he took out a worn violin, tossed a couple of dollars and some loose change into the case, turned to face the foot-traffic, and began to play.¹

Over the next 43 minutes, the man performed six pieces of music and, as one observer later put it: "The acoustics [of the subway station] proved surprisingly kind... The violin is an instrument that is said to be much like the human voice, and in this [man's]... hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang -- ecstatic, sorrowful, importuning, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous."

During that three-quarters of an hour, exactly 1,097 people walked by. As the reporter tells it: "Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation, aware of your cupidity but annoyed by the unbidden demand on your time and your wallet? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he's really bad? What if he's really good? Do you have time for beauty?"

On that morning, you'd think the choice might have been a bit easier. You see, the 30-something fiddler was Joshua Bell. Three days before, 2500 music fans had packed out Boston's Symphony Hall, willing to pay stratospheric prices just to get close to this Grammy award-winning virtuoso. As composer, John Corigliano, says: Joshua Bell "plays like a god."

The well-worn instrument in Bell's hands that morning in Washington was also not ordinary. It was a \$3.5M *Stradivarius*, handcrafted in 1713 during the Italian master's "golden period." No one to this day has been able to unravel the mystery of how Antonio Stradivari blended varnishes, carpentry, and craftsmanship to make an instrument that plays the unparalleled sound a Strad does, especially in the hands of a genius.

And Josh Bell didn't play just any tunes that subway morning. "Bell decided to begin with 'Chaconne' from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Bell calls it 'not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece," Bell says, and "structurally perfect.'" Each of the six pieces Bell played was among the most magnificent musical works ever to grace the air of this planet with sound.



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So, what do you suppose happened *next*? Did a large throng of people stop in their tracks and gather around? Did they reach into their wallets or clap in awestruck thanks for such beauty and mastery appearing in their midst? Did some humbly ask where they could hear him again, or how they could learn to play like that? The answer is that "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 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look... There was never a crowd, not even for a second."

At the Subway in Jerusalem

Can you imagine that? Could people really be that blind and deaf to the presence of such magnificence right there in their midst? Could a gift like Joshua gave fail to turn all but a small number of people from their mad pursuit of whatever they were onto next? The answer, of course, is YES. It happened that morning in that Washington station, as it happened on a much more important scale in another subway, in another city, long ago.

The Bible teaches that one day the greatest artist in the Universe decided to share his gifts with ordinary people. He came from a Symphony Hall so vast and magnificent that we have no earthly parallel to it. In that place are beings so glorious that the finest tuxedos and evening gowns of our red carpets are but rags compared to their brilliance. Every member of that awesome angelic audience considered it pure joy and privilege just to be in His presence, rendering Him their ovation for all eternity.

But the Bible declares that He voluntarily left that place and went all the way down to a place that, when compared to his previous environment, was something akin to the deepest, dankest subway station. It was a place of cacophonous noise, oily odor, and grime – a place where people rushed anxiously from one thing to the next, elbowing each other for position, caught up in making a buck or working an agenda, only stopping occasionally to leer at the flesh on a magazine cover, to linger over a lottery stand, or transfix on some glowing screen.

But the Artist, whose name interestingly enough was also Joshua (Yeshua) in the Hebrew, took his place among them wearing blue jeans. He opened up his case and began to play. In parables about the Kingdom of God, in acts of healing, courage, and compassion that displayed that Kingdom's beauty and power, Jesus played. He played with absolute perfection the magnificent concerto of God's redeeming grace, of his relentless love for mankind, and of the way of life open to us all. Some had ears to



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hear and stopped to listen. Some responded with gratitude for His amazing gift. Several followed after Him. But most walked on by.

Some, however, actually took *offense* at his playing. They didn't like His music or His suggestion that the tunes *they* were fond of did not reflect the goodness of God. They felt that His playing was distracting others from buying their wares or it was making them look bad. And so they convinced the Roman police that He was a danger to a liberal society and good government. They seized Him in the subway and beat him to a bloody pulp. They hauled him outside the Jerusalem station and drove nails through his instrument, expecting to silence his music.

But what the Romans and Jewish leaders alike did not understand was the genius of the Master who had made this instrument. For *He knows secrets* not yet revealed to any other mind about how to make and remake the instrument of the human body and soul. And so, early on Easter morning, three days after the authorities believed they had shut down His concert forever, the Master of this Universe raised Jesus to life again. Some women wandering through the subway in the graveyard silence of the early morning were amazed to find Joshua (Jesus) standing there, playing a tune of love's victory as crystal clear as a *bell*.

At the Subway in Chicagoland

It is, however, what happened *next*, I think, that has the most importance for you and me. You see, it is one thing to hear a great story – to be told of an amazing event that really happened or to find your heart stirred for a moment by the music of God. But it is quite a different thing to really respond to it – to take the music into our soul and resolve that we will follow this Jesus wherever He leads us. Every Easter, the great concerto gets played again for us. We hear the story of the One who descended from the heights into the subway of this world. We hear the soaring notes of the gospel message that Jesus has paid the full price for our sin and proven God's power over even the fearful silence of our impending death. We hear his call to build his kingdom in this world. But the temptation, nay, even the tendency for most of us is to smile and just walk on by.

Sometimes, I think, it's because we think we are just too far gone, too set in our ways, for anything to really change for us. Our marriages are just the way they are. Our character has about as much virtue in it as it probably ever will. We see everybody else rushing on past Easter, getting on with just getting to brunch, going to school, making a living, pounding out the to-do list on the way to catching the next fast-moving train.

In this way, I think, we're a bit like Simon Peter when we meet him in John 21. Peter had heard the Master's music once. He'd stopped and stayed with Jesus for awhile.



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He'd had great hopes of actually becoming one of the great disciples once. But when the pressure was on, he'd crumbled. He'd denied Jesus. He'd just walked on by Him, as if Christ was dead. He'd gone back to his old way of life, back to being just an ordinary fisherman. He was too scarred and battered to be of use to God. Things for him could never really change. But what Peter didn't yet understand is that the Master knows secrets about how to make and remake the human instrument. The poet, Myra Welch, understood this too, and she tells of it in an old, perhaps, familiar poem.

"Twas battered and scared, and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while to waste much time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile. 'What am I bidden, good folks,' he cried, 'Who'll start the bidding for me? A dollar, a dollar - now who'll make it two? Two dollars, and who'll make it three? Three dollars once, three dollars twice, Going for three'... but no! From the room far back a gray-haired man came *forward* and picked up the bow. Then wiping the dust from the old violin, and tightening up the strings, He played a melody, pure and sweet, as sweet as an angel sings.

"The music ceased and the auctioneer with a voice that was quiet and low, said: 'What am I bidden for the old violin?' And he held it up with the bow. 'A thousand dollars - and who'll make it two? Two thousand - and who'll make it three? Three thousand once, three thousand twice and going - and gone,' said he. The people cheered, but some of them cried, 'We do not quite understand - What changed its worth?' {And] the man replied: '[Why] the touch of the masters hand.'"

And many a [one] with life out of tune, and battered and torn with sin, is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd. Much like the old violin. A 'mess of pottage,' a glass of wine, a game and he travels on. He's going once, and going twice - He's going - and almost gone! But the MASTER comes, and the foolish crowd, never can quite understand, the worth of a soul, and the change that's wrought, by the touch of the MASTER'S hand."

Please pray with me...

O Master of redeeming love and resurrecting life, there is not one among us, who does not need the touch of Your hand. You know how often we have been among the great masses who rush by You in this harried Subway that human sin has dug in a world that You began as a Garden. You have called us to an intentional journey with You and that remarkable audience that is Your church on earth and in heaven, but we've not really responded to that call, at least not fully. Maybe we turn and glance at you now and then. Maybe we've paused, thrown some bills in the case, and then just kept moving, following the clamoring crowd.



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*But today, some of us have heard the music of Your gospel in a new way. We've had our hearts stirred by all that You've done for us. Thank You that, like You did with Peter, You meet us even in the midst of our failures and fears and welcome us back into Your fellowship and service. Even if everyone else goes somewhere else, we hear Your word: "**What is that to you? You must follow me.**"² And so, we're going to be back here to meet You next week. We're going to be looking for Your presence and listening for Your music, everywhere we go. We're putting the battered instrument of our lives in Your capable hands today and waiting to hear and see what You, O Master, are going to play in and through us NEXT. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.*

¹ Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007; Page W10. I recommend going online, reading the article, and watching the actual video footage of this event. Joshua Bell can also be seen and heard, playing the Oscar-winning score for the film, *The Red Violin* (1998).

² John 21:22