

“Breath Test”
John 20:19-23
April 15, 2007
By Larry Gaylord

What did you do on the night of Easter last week? On the evening of Easter last Sunday, our family had a ham dinner with herbed mashed potatoes and green beans and for dessert we had a 3-layer lemon cream cheese cake from Sam’s Club. It’s a way of celebrating the resurrection. But then you say, “Well, Easter’s over for another year.” In fact, it’s just beginning.

It should have been a great day—but they weren’t there yet. They’d already heard Mary Magdalene say, “I have seen the Lord.” They thought, well that’s nice, but our lives are still in danger. We can talk about your spiritual experience some other time. They hadn’t connected with the resurrection yet. So they were still living as though it hadn’t happened. They huddled in fear of the authorities behind a locked door. Far from being open and welcoming to the world, this little church was shut tight against it. Fear has that effect on people. It shuts the world out. As a church, if we can call them that, they were completely stuck. That locked door spoke volumes about where they were spiritually. How would they ever get unstuck?

First they had to recognize. Recognize what? Or who?

It’s fascinating to realize that on the same night of Easter Jesus came to the disciples in the room and he showed them his hands and side. The first day of the week, says the scripture, and so it is that resurrection day became the chief day of worship for Christians—the first day of the new world in Christ. Then it says the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Put those two things together in your mind. From fear to rejoicing in an instant—and the turning point is when he shows them his wounds. It’s almost as though they recognized him by his wounds.

Joshua Bell is a world-renowned violinist. Last week he received the most coveted award in classical music, the Avery Fisher Prize. But a couple of months before that, he took part in an unusual experiment. He stood playing his violin outside a Metro station in Washington DC during morning rush hour. Over a thousand people passed by—and all but completely ignored him. Normally people pay \$100 or more to hear him, but in this

setting he collected a total of \$32.17. He played an instrument crafted by Antonio Stradivari, valued at \$3.5million. But hardly anybody showed the least bit of interest. “I expected it,” he reported, “but still it was almost hurtful when somebody just walked by when I really did try to play my best.” I’m not sure it was the fairest test to run. People were in a hurry to get to work, or catch a train. A lot of them wouldn’t have appreciated classical music in any circumstance. But—out of context they just didn’t recognize this great violinist. After I read the story I was up at O’Hare and there was a man playing a flute. He wasn’t world-famous, I’m sure, but he played beautifully. In that entire crowd, was anybody listening?

Christ’s resurrection body had supernatural powers, it was radiant and new—but those wounds were the key to recognizing him for the disciples. The wounds were still there. Couldn’t God in raising up that body have restored it to wholeness, and repaired the broken places? God could have, but those are meant to stay. For all eternity he bears the marks of his sacrifice in his body. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.

I want to suggest that the woundedness is key: take that away and we lose the saving power. They signify that the One we follow knows about human suffering, loss, and pain. By his stripes we are healed. And to recognize Christ among them—that was the first step to getting unstuck. Their fear turned to rejoicing. Jesus was among them, and it was going to be okay. Soon they would unlock the door, and leave the room.

But having recognized, they needed to be energized. He breathed on them, giving them power. This is the breath test. We know that breathalyzer tests are given by the police when they suspect someone is drinking and driving. Presumably the suspect hopes nothing shows up on the test. But for us, it works in the opposite way. We want to live and breathe the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. We pray for the unexpected, the signs of God’s presence to be in our life together. These signs include new people connecting with God here; acts of generous giving and stewardship in response to human need; sacrificial service; and startling answers to prayer. Today is the tax deadline—but this year they’re giving an extra couple of days. I read of a group of Mennonites who gather around now each year to share their form 1040’s with each other, to show they’ve been faithful in giving the agreed upon percentage. It’s completely voluntary, and it is said they share joyfully, because they’ve discovered the joy of sacrificial giving. Sharing tax

forms isn't something Presbyterians would do, but it makes you think. To be energized by the Spirit, by the breath of Jesus, is to have an ability to keep going enthusiastically, and also to experience unusual happenings that can only be explained by the mystery of God. How do you give a breath test for presence of the Holy Spirit? A lot of it is intangible—love, joy peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, self-discipline. How do you quantify those things? I guess we know them when we see them. To be energized by Christ breathing on us means to say yes to God, to say yes to the call, to embrace the cross joyfully.

They recognized, they were energized, then they were deputized. Jesus wanted this little church to help him; to represent him in the world; to carry his work forward—so he says, raise your right hand and repeat after me. Deputized. Look at what he says to them: Be on your way. “As the Father sent me, I send you.” That’s a pretty quick turnaround. Lord, won’t you give us a while to ponder this thing? No—ponder as you go. The old Andy Griffith show, when he played the sheriff of Mayberry—those were great shows, and sometimes you see them in rerun. There’s a clip making the rounds on YouTube that’s a real classic—when Sheriff Taylor taught his son Opie about the rules of evidence, and how it can’t be coerced, and how evidence gathered deceitfully was not admissible in court. It’s a great lesson for today. Sheriff Andy Taylor had a deputy—Barney Fife. Barney was a bit clumsy, awkward, liable to say or do exactly the wrong thing, or shoot himself in the foot—literally. But for all his faults, Barney *was deputized*—and Sheriff Andy never gave up on him, and continued to try to teach and affirm him. Barney represented the Sheriff, and the integrity of the office, and the solemnity of the law—and no matter how much he messed up, the Sheriff always backed him. We’ve been deputized—yes, we’re a bit like Barney in our witness—imperfect, clumsy, and silly—but we’re part of the team, we wear the badge, there’s a job to do.

Where does he send them? It’s not a “where.” It’s a “what.” He’s sending them out with the ministry of forgiveness. The ministry of forgiveness is different than forgiving. When somebody offends me, then I have to work through the forgiveness part. But as God’s people, we share the message and ministry of forgiveness with all who will listen. And to be a person of the resurrection means to look for the signs of resurrection. This week in Washington DC there was such a sign. A march on the mall leading to the

capitol steps--speeches and even band music—nothing unusual in that, except: the speeches were given by high school students, and the marchers were hundreds of students from Maryland schools, and the bands were high school bands. The topic of their concern: the genocide occurring in Darfur, Sudan. These young women and men cared enough about incredible suffering in a distant land to do something, and to call for world leaders to act. It's a sign of hope.

Recognize—the resurrected One among us. Be energized by Christ's very breath in us. And remember: we've been deputized, we're partners with the Lord, in sharing hope and forgiveness with God's whole world.

Let us pray: Lord, on the night of Easter you appeared among your friends, and with you there—everything change. Be among us in resurrection power still today, so we may joyfully seek and do your will. Through Jesus the Christ. Amen.