



THE MAN WHO MISSED THE MEETING

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If we had the opportunity to personally meet with Jesus in the flesh, would any person who claims to be a Christian miss such a chance? I would go so far as to say that many who are NOT Christians would seize such an opportunity. In the New Testament, we read about a man who, for one reason or another, did not attend a gathering of the Lord's disciples and missed out on a great deal. Admittedly, he had little reason to think that anything extraordinary would take place that night. In fact, under the circumstances, he probably thought it would be a depressing time to be in that meeting.

We read the story in John 20. And I'll pick up the reading in verse 19. *"Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."*

The events of our text took place on the first day of the week: the Sunday upon which Jesus resurrected from the dead. It was a day of many emotions. On one hand, it had only been three days since the dead body of Jesus had been retrieved from the cross and laid in Joseph's tomb. In the minds of the disciples, the burial of Jesus represented the burial of all their hopes and dreams. They had not understood Christ's promise to rise from the dead. So, as this Sunday had dawned, they were sad. The road they had walked the past three and half years had come to a dead end. Their visions of a Messianic kingdom now dashed by the death of their Teacher and soon-to-be King. They felt lost and did not know where to go from here.

The first rays of that Sunday sunrise, however, brought new hope – first to the women at the tomb; then to John and Peter; and eventually to the other apostles as rumors began to spread of the empty tomb

and the possible resurrection of Jesus. The conclusive proof came that evening as the disciples gathered in a secret room. Oh, the wonder and the joy they must have felt as suddenly, Jesus appeared in their midst and showed them the wounds in His hands and in His side. And the bible says "Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord..." A Sunday night meeting that began with questions and perhaps doubt ended with joy and exhilaration as the disciples left knowing that their Savior was risen from the dead. But – and unfortunately when you talk about great things happening in the church – there is usually a 'but' – but the bible says that "Thomas was not with them when Jesus came."

We're not told where Thomas was or what he was doing at the time. I don't think it is far-fetched to assume that he was depressed and perhaps off moping somewhere in solitude. He has often been described as the pessimistic and skeptical disciple and so perhaps he is off to himself disillusioned and downhearted. Maybe he was thinking to himself: I knew this was all too good to be true. I wasn't so gullible to not have my reservations about all of this. And sometimes doubt and discouragement lead Christians today to grow weak in their faith. I don't know if that's what happened with Thomas or not, but I do know that wherever Thomas was, he was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them on this night, and I also know he missed a great blessing by not being there. Thus it is with many who claim to follow Jesus today. Whatever keeps them away, keeps them from enjoying many great things in the Christian life. And something certainly keeps many Christians away from gatherings of Christ's disciples today.

In nearly any church you visit, the same thing is true: on Lord's Day morning there are usually a few missing because they put something or someone in their life before Christ. And of those who do attend on Sunday morning, you can generally cut that number in half on Sunday night. And if the same church meets midweek, you can cut the number by even more. Why is that? It's not a mystery. A few have legitimate reasons that they are not able to attend every meeting of the local church. Perhaps sickness or some extenuating and unavoidable situation causes them to not be able to attend on Sunday night or Wednesday or the gospel meeting. Usually, though, if we're honest with ourselves, it is other things that keep most members away. Perhaps it is that worldly things interest them more. Perhaps they see money or position in the company as worth sacrificing spiritual things for. Perhaps they feel a stronger tie to their earthly family than they do to God's family. Maybe it's simply laziness; or it's apathy and the lack of a spiritual appetite but these and many other things keep many a professing Christian away from the meetings of the church. Here in this post-resurrection account, though, we can see what all Thomas missed by being wherever he was instead of being where he might have and probably should have been and that is gathered with the other disciples on this important night.

Consider some of the things Thomas missed when he missed this Sunday night meeting. First, he missed the fellowship of brethren who could have encouraged him. The last week had been traumatic for all the disciples and they had all experienced a wave of emotions. They began the week with Jesus being hailed as a king by the multitudes along the road into Jerusalem, but they ended the week with the religious leaders and Romans finally putting Him to death. The movement Jesus had started was in danger of falling apart and them all going home and trying to put some kind of life back together without Him. If there was ever a time when they needed encouragement and to draw strength from one another it was that night. They didn't understand all of Jesus' promises. They didn't know what to make of all the rumors and the resurrection appearances of Christ. But here they are huddled together trying to make sense of it all and trying to find some refuge from the storm that they had been caught in and it was in that sacred hour as night was about to fall that Jesus miraculously appeared to them and they knew that He was indeed risen again. Thomas needed that encouragement, but he didn't receive it because he was not there.

Second, Thomas missed seeing with his own eyes the risen Lord! What a great experience that was when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst, and they saw His wounded hands and side yet here He was alive and in His glorified form. They had seen Him do great wonders over the last three and a half years. They had seen Him walk on water; they had seen Him give sight to the blind; they had seen Him restore twisted and withered legs and feet; three of them had seen the transfiguration; they had even seen Him raise others from the dead but I would suggest to you that the greatest thing they had witnessed in their lives was to see the resurrected Christ appear to them in that meeting that night; not only because of the miracle but because of what all it meant. Thomas missed that experience. And because Thomas missed that, he lived in unbelief and doubt and perhaps great spiritual jeopardy for an entire week for it would be eight days before Christ would appear to them and to Thomas again.

Thomas missed out on the peace that came from that meeting with Christ. As Jesus appeared to them, He said, “peace be unto you” and we know that when Jesus speaks peace, it calms the fiercest of storms. Many Christians don’t truly know peace in their hearts because they have one foot in the church and the rest of them is outside in the world.

Thomas also missed a great promise that was made that night. In verses 21-23 *“So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* Here, Jesus describes the apostolic work that was ahead of them as witnesses of His resurrection. He symbolically imparts the promise of the Holy Spirit as He had told them in John 14 thru 16 who would equip and empower them to do the work that only the apostles of Christ could now do. Well, Thomas was an apostle, but the next verse says: *“Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.”* Thomas missed that sacred moment. He spent another week excluded and alone in his doubts because for whatever reason, HE MISSED THE MEETING that night and he missed some wonderful things that he desperately needed in his life whether he realized it or not.

There are many Christians who miss out on the fulness of Christ and the blessings of the Christian life and citizenship in Christ’s kingdom because they are willing to miss the meetings of the church as well. We’re living in a strange and difficult time where spiritual things are concerned. For perhaps the first time since the beginning of the Christian faith, the idea is being commonly accepted that one can be a Christian and live the Christian life with little to no involvement in the local church. Millions of people claim to love and follow Christ but see no need to be a member of a local church and faithfully attend its services. Friend, it is God’s will for local Christians to make up a local congregation and regularly assemble. It is impossible -- and I want to stress that -- it is impossible to be a faithful Christian without being a faithful part of the local church. As unpopular as that may be, that’s simply what the bible teaches.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 described the local church as a body made up of many members joined together in one with Christ as the head. The apostle who wrote Hebrews commanded the believers whose faith was in danger of growing weak in Hebrews 10:24-25 *“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”* It is more, you see, than merely a duty we have to worship God, it is a duty we have to one another and an opportunity we are given to build up others in the faith and advance the cause of Christ. That’s a direct command given by the Holy Spirit through the inspired apostle. The historian Luke

indicates to us in Acts 2 that the early disciples were together in some capacity nearly every day. I'm going to tell you whether you believe it or not, you cannot live the Christian life alone and you cannot please the Lord and refuse to be part of the church for which He died. Why would any Christian who desires to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) not want to be there every time the church comes together to build itself up in spiritual things.

Let me give you some reasons why faithful Christians should attend every service of the church they can: First, Jesus is there. The unseen attendant at every gathering of Christ's church is Christ Himself. When the exiled apostle John wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, he described them as seven golden lampstands. Jesus told Him to write to those churches to the Ephesian brethren He said, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." (Revelation 2:1) The late preacher and my dear friend and mentor Bro. Lynwood Smith used to preach on that verse and he used to powerfully paint the scene of Christ walking up and down the aisles every Sunday of every meeting house where His people were gathered, looking through the windowpanes of every soul. If Jesus is there, shouldn't I desire to be there?

We should attend every service because Christians are to "hunger and thirst for righteousness." So said Jesus in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:6. Of all that beatitude implies, at the very least can I claim to hunger and thirst for the things of God and willfully miss the services of the church where God is being worshipped, Christ is being preached, and where the scriptures are being expounded?

We should attend every service to "grow in grace and knowledge" as the bible commands us to do in 2 Peter 3:18. We should attend every service because by so doing we will encourage others. As we read in Hebrews 10:24 we are to "consider one another and provoke to love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together..." Friend, it's not just about the encouragement that you need from others, you have just as much responsibility to BE an encouragement to other Christians. If you don't need to take that responsibility seriously, why should anyone else?

Nearly 30 years ago when I was a very young preacher, I went to a distant state to hold a week-long gospel meeting. It was an isolated place and the church there was very small and struggling. It was a discouraging situation from the very start. But there was a little band of believers who were trying to keep the cause of Christ alive in that small town. They all showed up on Sunday when we began the meeting, and everyone seemed encouraged to be having a meeting. On Monday night, however, everyone wasn't there. Some missed. They missed Tuesday night and Wednesday night and Thursday night. It cast a pall over our little meeting. One person who was conspicuously absent was a young man who could have been a great asset to the church there. He was a member and could have provided a spark of interest that sometimes only young people can provide. But after Sunday, he didn't attend. One night after service, I returned to the home where I was staying. It was his grandparents' home. When I walked through the door, he was laid back in the recliner with the remote control in his hand watching some television show. I said we had been missing him the last several nights and I wish he was there. Now, I've heard all kinds of excuses through the years but this one was unusual. It was pitiful and honest at the same time. He had a guilty look and was kind of embarrassed and he hung his head and said "Well, I'm just not strong enough to be there." Now, on one hand I wish more Christians were that honest. Because that's truthfully why most of them aren't there. At least he admitted it. But did he not realize that's where he needed to be to grow stronger? There was a cause he claimed to believe in that was struggling in that little town in part because he wasn't there. He not only was forfeiting the strength he might have received by being there, but he was also depriving others of the encouragement his own

presence and participation could have given. You have just as much influence as the next person. The question is: are you using it to encourage the church and to encourage the cause of Christ or are you tearing it down and eroding it through your own indifference and worldly preoccupation?

We need to attend every service because of the growth it can cause in our own life and in the lives of others. Your presence alone makes a difference. We should attend every service to set an example for our children and grandchildren. I was raised in a home where we attended every service we could without deliberation or debate.

We should be at every meeting because we are “zealous of good works.” (Titus 2:14) We should be there to bolster our faith for the coming week to resist temptation. We should be there lest we be guilty of professing to know God but in works denying Him. (Titus 1:16).

And finally, we should be present because we are told to always be watching for the Lord’s return. One of these hours, the Lord is going to return. With the sound of a trumpet and with a shout, Christ is going to break through the eastern sky with His angels and we’re told to ever be watching for that moment. “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” How will feel if the Lord’s church is assembled at that moment and you’re not there but rather at a ball game or at home watching television or out golfing, or fishing, or whatever it may be that you could have put off and done some other time? Don’t be like Thomas who missed the Sunday night meeting. Christ gave him another opportunity and appeared eight days later and made a believer out of Thomas but oh, what peace and what joy and what blessing he missed in the meantime because he wasn’t there.

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