

# The One Who Missed Church

*Summary:* It was Sunday night and the disciples of Jesus Christ had met together. But there was one of the disciples who was not there. And what a service he missed!<sup>1</sup>

*Scripture:* 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

*Date:* Sunday, 16 April 2023 (Narellan Cong)

## Introduction

### When to Pay Attention

When we read the Bible, we do well to pay attention when fine details are provided. For instance, when names are included in the letters of Paul, it is very likely those persons were alive and known to the congregations to whom the apostle was writing. Here's a (painfully) long example, from *The Book of Romans*:

Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life ... Greet my dear friend Epaphroditus, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews and fellow prisoners ... Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our coworker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those who belong to the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother—and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. (Romans 16:3–15)<sup>2</sup>

Do you reckon Paul, and this church community, knew these people?

Similarly, the events of Jesus' passion week have been recorded for us with such detail that we can track Jesus' movements day by day.

For example, we know Jesus arrived at Bethany on a Friday afternoon. He and his disciples were treated to a feast in the home of Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead), and his sisters, Martha and Mary.

Jesus entered Jerusalem, astride a donkey, two days later, on a Sunday. He wept over the city and its inhabitants as he approached, entered the Temple, then returned to Bethany.

On Monday, he traveled again to Jerusalem, cursed a figtree, chased money-changers out of the Temple, had an interesting conversation with some God-fearing persons from Greece, then returned to Bethany.

The next day, being Tuesday, Jesus and the disciples traveled again to Jerusalem. On the way, they found the figtree had withered. While in the Temple, Jesus got into an extended

conversation with local religious leaders, during which they challenged his authority as an accredited teacher/Rabbi.

Jesus' final public teaching was given that day, during which he denounced the religious leaders for their hypocrisy —using very strong words indeed. Then he returned to Bethany for the night, where he was treated to another feast, and a local woman anointed him with perfumed oil. Unbeknownst to her, this foreshadowed and prepared him for his impending burial.

And so on ... it is really quite surprising, when you pay attention, just how much detail we are provided for the events of Holy Week. One would think the Gospel writers really wanted us to pay attention and take these events seriously...

### **Easter Sunday**

We know what happened on that first Good Friday: Jesus was arrested, tortured and tried, condemned and crucified.

On Sunday, he rose from the dead. The tomb was discovered to be empty by some of Jesus' female disciples. This was confirmed by Peter and John on that same day. Jesus also appeared to two other disciples as they traveled to Emmaus, on that Easter Sunday.

That same Sunday night the disciples of Jesus Christ met together. So much happened that day that was quite unexpected and extraordinary, to say the least! We can imagine how they would have been filled with both fear and wonder as they discussed together all that had happened.

But there was one of the disciples who was not there. As if he was surprised at this, John drew particular attention to this detail:

But Thomas (called "Twin"), one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. (John 20:24)

The disciple called Thomas, who had a nickname, likely because he was a valued member of the group, being not just any disciple, but one of the core twelve, that Thomas missed this Sunday night gathering. And what a meeting he missed!

Let us look together more closely at what Thomas missed.

## **Explanation**

### **Thomas Missed the Fellowship of Other Friends of Jesus**

Thomas missed the fellowship of gathering with other friends of Jesus!

Even if Jesus had not appeared personally in that Sunday night gathering, still His friends and followers would have found strength and comfort in talking with one another:

*How to make sense of what happened, everything leading up to the cross then the empty tomb?*

*How to make sense of what this all means for what Jesus taught?*

*How to discern and decide together what to do next?*

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

We need each other in Christ. I need the strength of my brothers-in-faith. I need the prayers of my sisters-in-faith. I need your care. I must have your support, just as you need mine.

I must not miss the fellowship of God's people or I will be the poorer because of it.

At such a desperate and difficult time, Thomas missed the fellowship of his brothers and sisters-in-faith, the commiseration and comfort of the friends of Jesus.

### **Thomas Missed the Personal Strength and Power Derived From Worship**

One detail that is missing from the Gospel accounts is that we do not know why Thomas was missing.

When the disciples fled Jesus' side at his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, on Good Friday, they all scattered. We only know what became of Peter, who followed Jesus and the soldiers to the high priest's courtyard (Jn 18:15-16). Another, unnamed disciple was with Peter, and because of his acquaintance with the high priest, Caiaphas, was able to gain entrance to the courtyard for himself and Peter.

In the courtyard, however, Peter denied Jesus three times, at the crowing of a rooster, just as Jesus prophesied. Peter then also fled, leaving behind, presumably, the other unnamed disciple.

We know not what happened to the other ten core disciples of Jesus. We do know John appeared at the cross, days later, alongside Mary, the mother of Jesus, and some other women disciples.

We can only guess what happened to the other disciples after they fled. We can imagine their despair, yet we know not where that suffering led them to go.

If anything, Jesus taught that, by faith, his friends would experience suffering. Some of that suffering would come at the hands of the authorities, just as happened to Jesus; yet, we are not to worry for,

Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said. (Luke 12:11-12)

Some of that suffering will come from the inadequacies and physical limitations of our bodies,

Her rival would taunt her severely just to provoke her, because the LORD had kept Hannah from conceiving. (1 Samuel 1:6)

Suffering will also come from the taunting from and torments of those around us.

Yet suffering, in whatever form we experience it, serves a purpose for, by faith, the friends of Jesus learn through suffering. As the apostle wrote,

we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. (Romans 5:3b-4)

I believe it is fair to say a good deal of this transformation happens when we worship.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. (Colossians 3:1-2)

It is in heartfelt worship that we can, in actuality, follow the admonition to set our affections on things above until it changes our lifestyle!

Worship does something to us. We 'go to church' to take the Church away with us after! You do not go to spectate, but to participate.

When I gather with God's people, I plan to reach out to Him in heartfelt worship. I determine to praise Him and to adore Him. I expect He will bless me —not because I am worshipping, but because of his nature and generosity. I expect God will bless me with a fresh perspective on His presence, His power, His promises, His purpose, His provision.

We can imagine Thomas fled the side of Jesus and the company of His disciples because he was filled with fear at Jesus' arrest. For the ten days following, Thomas was likely filled with despair and confusion, all of which would have been ameliorated at best, softened at the very least, if he had gathered with his friends, the friends of Jesus, for fellowship and worship. He would have found there, with them, the strength and power he needed.

### **Thomas Missed Being in the Presence of Jesus**

By going off by himself, Thomas missed being in the presence of Jesus, for Jesus himself gave this beautiful promise:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20)

Whether in worship or in congregational meetings, when we gather in Jesus' name and for his purposes, he has promised to be present. If Jesus is present, men will be changed, women will be transformed, all of us will be so empowered that you will scarcely recognise our new selves.

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," the Lord said, "you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." (Luke 17:6)

The promise given is the friends of Jesus will be filled with power from on high and will do exploits in His name and by His strength, even with faith as small as a mustard seed.

When we gather in Jesus' name, whether to worship or to discern together his will for our church, the presence of Jesus can be so real that your attitude should be, "I can hardly wait for tonight's service!" or "I'm looking forward to this week's meeting!"

I've known that kind of enthusiasm! And it's blessed to see a church alive with the presence and power of God. Such is not to be missed.

In the case of that first Easter Sunday, the resurrected Jesus was actually and physically present among them, where they gathered. For every gathering thereafter, Jesus is present too, when we gather in his name, for that is promise. Is that your expectation?

But Thomas missed it because Thomas did not expect it. He had heard Jesus' teaching, but had not taken it to heart.

Thomas missed being in the presence of Jesus exactly when Thomas needed Jesus most.

## **Application**

If ever there was a gathering of God's people not to be missed it was that gathering, for as the disciples worshipped the resurrected Jesus, they had a powerful experience:

### **The Commission**

After saying this, he breathed on them and said, "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." (John 20:22–23)

When Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples, he spoke to them and breathed on them, such that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They became new creations, after the manner of the first Creation (Gen 1:1–2; 2:7).

I will explore this passage more in a few weeks' time but, for now, notice the change. In breathing on them, Jesus gave them a new life sustained by the Holy Spirit.

In giving them that Spirit, Jesus commissioned the community of the disciples, his friends, to continue his work of making God known in the world.<sup>3</sup>

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the world?

When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: About sin, because they do not believe in me (John 16:8–9)

Thus, through the Holy Spirit and with the Holy Spirit, our life and work in the world is to make Jesus known and to lead others into a saving knowledge of his goodness and grace.

Thomas missed that commission moment when he missed the opportunity to gather with the friends of Jesus on the night of his resurrection. That commission still applied to him, especially after his reinstatement a week later, when he was finally afforded his own experience of the risen Christ, yet how much more empowered would he have felt had he been among those to whom that commission was given directly?

## **Conclusion**

No one can deny Thomas' fear, confusion, and despair, at seeing his Lord and friends, Jesus, arrested and taken away by the soldiers. Thus begun more than a week of mental anguish and suffering. Thomas went off by himself, with his despair and confusion, and we get it. We understand the feeling.

Yet, in going off by himself, Thomas missed the opportunity to fellowship with other friends of Jesus, he missed the strength and power that comes from worshipping with the friends of Jesus, and he missed the presence of Jesus who comes into the midst of his friends when we gather.

What do we want when we experience fear, confusion, and despair? We want to be alone.  
What do we need when we experience fear, confusion, and despair? We need each other and we need our God. As it is written,

Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23–25)

We are a family by faith, a community of the friends of Jesus and those learning to be his friends, we are a church that meets for fellowship and worship, discussion and decision, because we expect Jesus to be with us just as he promised! When he is with us and you are present, then he will calm your fears, he will clarify your confusion, he will turn your despair into dancing.

Together, we build each other up, reach unity in faith, and grow into maturity in the knowledge of the Son of God because he is present among us!

Do not be the one who missed church!

### Endnotes

- 1 Adapted from an outline by Maze Jackson, “The Man Who Missed Church,” ed. Maze Jackson, *Golden Nuggets 19* (1983).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 Gail R. O’day, “The Gospel of John”, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 847.