

THE MAN WHO WAS NOT THERE

"But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came."
John 20:24.

It had been rumored that the tomb, in which the body of Christ had been placed, was empty. It had been said that He had arisen, and that the women had seen a vision of angels. When these glad tidings reached the disciples, they naturally assembled in the upper room. It was in that upper room that Christ had met them, talked to them about His approaching death, the meaning of His sacrifice, the deathlessness of His love and the certainty of His triumph. It was there He had drawn aside the veil and given them a glimpse into the future, and the reality of life in the Father's house. When the news came to them that the women had seen Him alive nothing could have been more natural than for them to meet again in that place of hallowed memories.

When these disciples assembled they were gloomy. They had mourned the death of their beloved Lord. Some of them had been to the grave where they had laid His precious body; they had seen the sealed sepulcher, and the Roman guards keeping watch. When they came together they were mourning for the Christ Who had died. While they were thus assembled, Christ came through the closed door and appeared to them as the living one. He was actually there, the same person who had been crucified at Calvary. Standing in their midst Christ greeted them with the words of the familiar salutation, "Peace be unto you." That benediction was among the last words Christ uttered as they had gone out of that room. The same words were the first with which He greeted them after His resurrection.

Not only did He speak to them, but "he shewed unto them his hands and his side," as evidence that He Who was alive and present with them was the same one Who had been laid low in death for them. It is not at all surprising that when He appeared and spoke thus to them that it is said, "Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord." On many occasions we too have been glad when by faith we have seen the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lord then commissioned His disciples in the words, "Peace be unto you: as my father hath sent me, even so send I you." Thus He gave them a job to do. Few things, if any, are more distressing than idleness. It is impossible for any Christian to enjoy his or her religion without feeling any responsibility to do something for the Lord. Furthermore, "He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." How many of us can testify that we have received a fresh anointing again and again in the place where Christ came and met with us? He comes time and again to establish us in the faith and to commission us to do something in His name. He breathes upon us in order that we may be empowered for all the duties of life.

At that memorable meeting all the disciples were present except two, Thomas and Judas. Only Judas was not expected. Judas had already betrayed his Lord and had been whipped and scourged by the remorse of conscience until he had left this world and had gone to his own place. However, Thomas was expected to be present for he was one of the twelve, nevertheless, he "was not with them when Jesus came." No reason was given for his absence, but Thomas was not there. He ought to have been with them, because he was one of the twelve whom Christ had chosen to be with Him. Those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership ought to be in their respective places.

Worship is the primary duty, and should be the eagerly accepted privilege, of every genuine Christian but its frequent neglect is a matter of common observation, and the effect upon the absentees, as well as on the Christian fellowship to which they belong, is to be deplored. It is a sad day for any church when its members begin to absent themselves from the services. It is sad when they can be counted on to be at social

functions and at their places of business, but cannot be counted on when the interests of the Kingdom are at stake. One cannot understand people who call themselves Christians, but are never found at the worship services in the Lord's house. There is something radically wrong with all such people.

I. Why Was Thomas Absent?

How did it happen that Thomas, seemingly the most needy of all the disciples, was not present to receive the inspiration and the uplift that came from this service. Surely he was not any busier than the other ten disciples. He did not have any more work to do than those who came. Supposedly he was not any more indisposed than they were. They were there, but he was absent. Surely it was not due to indifference. Tragically, many today separate themselves from the services of their churches because of deadening indifference. They are absorbed in other matters.

Thomas was not absent because he had found satisfaction elsewhere. Instead of being satisfied and happy, he was sad and miserable. By nature Thomas was of a melancholy disposition. Constitutionally and habitually he looked on the dark side of things and preferred to walk on the shady side of the street. After the crucifixion he brooded over his morbid doubts, and courted separation and solitude.

Thomas was absent because he had lost hope. He believed that Christ was dead, and consequently that the cause for which He had stood was lost. He believed that right was defeated and wrong enthroned forever. For him there was neither a single ray of light nor a gleam of hope. The bitterness of his sorrow had driven him to despair.

Thomas was not present because he did not expect the Lord Jesus to be there. As yet he did not believe that Christ had arisen from the dead. If he had only known or even dreamed that the Lord was going to be present, he would have been there also.

Why is it that Christians so frequently absent themselves from church services today? They offer various excuses such as being tired, not feeling very well, unfavorable weather, unexpected callers, and the only day they have to do something else. The fact is, it is the only day they do not have to do something else because it is God's day. As a rule when they absent themselves, it is simply because they do not want to be present. Those who absent themselves from the house of the Lord during the worship services prove their lack of love for Christ. Nobody who loves another habitually stays away from him or her.

II. What Did Thomas Miss By Being Absent?

1. Fellowship with Christ.

Thomas missed the fellowship that he might have had with Christ, and which the rest of the disciples enjoyed immensely. For a whole week he had been without any assurance that he had a risen Saviour. Instead of having a week of overflowing joy, as the other disciples did, Thomas nursed his gloom and unbelief and stayed in the doldrums. Because he did not go where Christ came, he did not see Him nor hear Him. Many of us know what it is to have fellowship with the Lord and from it to get a new lease on life, deeper assurance, stronger faith, and a greater desire to accomplish more in the work of the Lord. The other disciples had plenty to talk about, but Thomas was without any testimony because he had not been there when Christ came. Every time that a Christian today stays away from God's house he misses fellowship with Christ.

2. Fellowship with his brethren.

The other ten disciples had sweet fellowship together, but Thomas missed this. Every Christian who stays away from God's house on the Lord's day misses fellowship with other believers. When a Christian fails to go to church he is missed because his seat is empty, but he also misses the fellowship with his brethren which he sorely needs. There is no fellowship like that of Christ's followers. In any congregation there are people who come from different walks of life and different circumstances, and with different training, but there is always one common bond, namely, they are one in their love for Christ.

3. The thrill of great joy.

"Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." This joy might have been experienced by Thomas if he had only been there. During the week following his absence his reaction was typical. He had the blues. He was melancholy. He was discouraged. He actually became a doubter. There was no joy in his soul. When the joyous disciples tried to tell Thomas that they had seen Christ and had fellowship with Him, he said, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger in the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." Whereas ten of the disciples were happy Thomas was miserable. Whereas they had something to do Thomas was idle. While they were filled with faith, optimism and hope, Thomas had the blues. Missing church services today brings results that are similar to those which came in the life of Thomas. A person cannot be warm in the service of the Lord if he stays away from the services in God's house.

4. The gift of peace.

To those who were present Christ said, "Peace be unto you." How Thomas needed that gift! He was in a fever of restlessness and wretchedness. He was whipped by a tempest of doubt and unbelief. All of that time he might have enjoyed "the peace that passeth all understanding," but he missed it because he was absent when Christ came.

5. The commission to a great service.

Christ said unto them, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." But Thomas was not present to hear that commission. When Christ laid upon the disciples the high task of witnessing to the world, Thomas missed the great blessing of that occasion. Our Lord does not have any task to give to any individual who does not have time for worship and who is out of fellowship with Him.

6. A promise of success in His work.

"Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained."

It may be that you were once active and enthusiastic in the service of the Lord, but little by little you have slipped back until you are no longer found regularly among the worshippers in God's house. You are missing something. You are robbing yourself. When Christians meet together Christ manifests Himself to them. Seeing Him through the eyes of faith, there comes to us a new peace and joy, as well as a new sense of the purpose and worthfulness of life.

7. The privilege of helping his fellow disciples.

His fellow believers missed Thomas. His vacant place was a damper to their spirits. He was a bad example for others. He might have been a great encouragement to them. One cannot rob himself without robbing others. One cannot starve himself spiritually without helping to starve others. One cannot sin alone.

Christ misses every Christian who is not present. He knows how you are impoverishing and enfeebling yourself when you are not in attendance where and when He wants to meet you. Beloved, you are really missing something when you do not come regularly where the Lord Jesus Christ is.

On the Lord's day when Thomas was present with the rest, Christ spoke to him saying, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." One look at His pierced brow and the nail-printed hands and the doubts of Thomas were swept away forever, like clouds before the rising sun. From his overwhelmed heart there burst forth the confession, "My Lord and my God." Then Christ said, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me thou hast believed: blessed are they which have not seen, and yet have believed." Won't you believe on Him as your Saviour and confess Him as your Lord now, while we sing the invitation song?