

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church. Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 18, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 20:24

“But Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

PERSONALITIES OF THE PASSION
(3) The Disciple who was “Reported Missing”

What do you preach about on the Sunday following Easter? When the crashing crescendos of the Hallelujah Chorus have faded into silence, is anticlimax all that remains? Certainly not, for to the Christian, every Lord’s Day is a festival, a celebration of the resurrection, a personal confrontation with the living Christ.

I want to speak to you this morning about the disciple who missed church on the first Easter Sunday evening. In John 20:24, it is recorded, “But Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.” You always run the risk of losing out on some tremendous spiritual experience when you miss church!

What might have happened if a lad of fifteen, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, had not crawled out of bed on that cold snowy Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, and made his way, alone, to the little Methodist Chapel in Colchester, England, where, that morning, he had his rendezvous with destiny, found Christ as his Savior, and went on to become the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century?

But Thomas was “reported missing” from that first gathering of disciples after the resurrection.

“Reported missing”! What icy terror those two words brought to the hearts of parents, wives and family during the grim days of war! To be told with the curt callousness of an official telegram that a dear one had been wounded, or killed in action, was indeed a terrible thing; but there was something perhaps even worse, and that was to be notified that a loved one had been posted as M.I.A. – “missing in action” – that after some desperate encounter with the enemy, he had failed to answer the roll call, and that his fate, and even his whereabouts, was unknown. This was the hardest blow of all. The uncertainty of it, the interminable, nerve-racking suspense, the days and months and even years of waiting for some scrap of information, was almost more than people could bear.

Now I want to make this stern wartime phrase, “reported missing”, a point of departure from which to approach the discussion of a matter of vital importance to the cause of Christ in the world today, namely: The widespread indifference to the Church and the Christian faith in general. Why is it that so many nowadays, like Thomas long ago, are “Reported missing” when the roll call is made of those who are on the Lord’s side?

To determine this, we must first of all see our text in its historical setting. Try to picture

the scene in Jerusalem on the evening of that first Sunday after the crucifixion of our Lord. The disciples are still stunned by the shock of His brutal murder. And as the night creeps in upon them, and they feel it is safe to walk through the dark streets, each of them makes his silent, stealthy way to a secret rendezvous in a small upstairs room. Some kind of strange story had gotten about to the effect that Jesus had been seen alive that morning, and doubtless word had been passed from one to another earlier in the afternoon, inviting them to meet that evening at a pre-arranged spot, behind barred doors, to discuss together this new rumor about their Master.

There we see them passing quietly into that attic room as the appointed hour of meeting draws near. James and John arrive first, then Bartholomew, Matthew, Andrew, Philip, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the brother of James; and at length Peter, with all his bluster gone, and looking the picture of misery and remorse, came skulking in like a whipped dog. Judas Iscariot, of course, is dead. They all know that. The word of his suicide had gone 'round like wildfire, and no one is particularly sorry. But there is still one absentee! There is still one voice that doesn't answer to the roll call – still one disciple “Reported Missing”! “But Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.”

Where was Thomas that night? Why did he not put in an appearance on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion? Or, to bring the question nearer home – why do people stay away from church and from Christ today? Why is it that there are the lapsed masses in our generation? The people for whom the Church, and the services of the Church, and the Church's Lord just mean nothing at all.

Let us take a look at Thomas and see if we can discover the answer.

1. Perhaps Thomas was missing because he was disappointed with the rest of the disciples. They had all let Christ down pretty badly. At the first sign of danger every single one of them had fled for dear life. I have a feeling that Thomas was the very last one to desert. You remember how, only ten days before, when the disciples had pled with Jesus not to return to Jerusalem because they knew He would be murdered if He set foot in the capital, it was one quiet, brave voice that spoke up and said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (John 11:16). It was the voice of Thomas! I believe it was only after Thomas had seen all the others deserting the sinking ship that he, himself, gave in and turned his back on the Cross and on the One Who was hanging there.

And now his heart is full of bitterness toward his brother disciples. “A miserable lot of cowards and hypocrites,” he thought. Even big, know-it-all Peter, the burly and boisterous “iron man” of the group, had actually denied Jesus with curses in front of a crowd in the courtyard of the High Priest's residence. “Why”, thought Thomas, “should I get mixed up with that gang again?”

How often do we hear that same sentiment expressed today! “Well, if these are your Christians, I don't think much of them.” “Why join the Church,” asks another, “when there are as good people outside of it as inside?” “Why don't you Christians practice what you preach?” exclaims yet another.

Is it not sadly true that many people today doubt the truth of the Gospel, and the power of Christ to transform human character, just because of the inconsistent lives of some professing Christians; especially of immoral television evangelists and the like? As disciples of our Lord, we ought to be different from other people. But are we? We ought to display a new quality of living and an impeccable integrity of character. But do we?

John McNeill, the Scottish preacher, used to say in his pungent and witty way, “The real trouble is not so much with the non-church-going as with the non-going Church!” If the Church of Christ is not a judgment, a challenge and an inspiration to the world, then there’s something radically wrong with the Church. If there is not within it an atmosphere so charged with the convicting power of God that when the outsider passes within its walls he becomes acutely conscious of his moral and spiritual peril and need, then the Church needs overhauling.

Let me try to illustrate this with a picture. Here, let us say, is a man going into a large and reputable men’s clothing store to make a small purchase – a tie perhaps, or a pair of socks. On entering, he tells himself firmly that that item, whatever it may be, is definitely all that he is going to buy. His suit is as good as new, and his overcoat is in excellent condition. The man is quite pleased with his appearance. And in response to the salesman’s polite enquiry as to whether there is anything further he can do for him, the shopper imagines himself replying confidently, “Oh no, thank you; that is all for today.” But no sooner has he gotten inside the store than his ideas as to his attire receive a rude shock. Above him, as he crosses the threshold, blazes a barrage of high-powered lights. Around him stands an array of brilliant mirrors; and as the man looks at himself in those mirrors, under the lights, he suddenly becomes miserably conscious of the defects in his clothing. His suit looks shabby; his coat frayed and threadbare. And, to crown it all, up steps an immaculately dressed salesman with a winsome smile, and at once the issue is decided! Before leaving the store, that professional salesman has persuaded our hapless friend to buy, if he has the cash or the credit card, not just a new tie, but an entire new outfit!

Now that is the psychology of salesmanship – proving to the person that he has a need which can be adequately met. But it is also a parable of what ought to happen when an outsider enters the House of God. He may be blissfully satisfied with himself before he enters, but as soon as he gets inside, and the light of God’s Word is flashed in upon his soul, there ought to be a transformation. Looking at the Christians around him, clothed in the grace and glory of God, he ought to feel the need to have what they have; and to find out how he may obtain it. Their very presence ought to be a judgment to him, and if that is not the case, then the Church is failing as to its proper function, and the Church’s Lord has a right to affirm that there is something radically wrong with those who comprise its membership. Thomas may have been “Reported missing” from that meeting because he was disappointed with the rest of the disciples.

2. Perhaps Thomas was missing because he was trying the way of escape. I believe that Thomas, by nature was a melancholy person, a confirmed pessimist. Perhaps he was so completely overcome by the horror of the event that had taken place at Calvary that he just couldn’t bear to talk to Peter or John or any of the others. All he wanted to do was to escape from the old associations. Jesus of Nazareth was now nothing but a haunting memory. God, in fact, had failed; he had done nothing to save Jesus. Why believe in God any more? Religion was “for the birds”. “For three years”, thought Thomas, “I have been living in a fool’s paradise: Three

wasted years with a travelling Preacher. All I want to do is to escape from it all.

Perhaps he was like the New York City bus driver, sixteen years in the employment of the city, who one day took the wheel of his vehicle, and instead of piloting it back and forth in the Bronx, as he had done for years, drove it right down to Florida! He just wanted to escape from “The Big Apple”! I wonder if Thomas felt like that? Perhaps he could relate to the Psalmist when he wrote: “Oh, that I had the wings off a dove! I would fly away and be at rest – I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm” (Ps. 55:6-8).

There are multitudes of people who doubt the love and power of God like that; frustrated, disappointed folk, soured by the trials of life, who feel that God has let them down and forsaken them. There are people who can never think of death, for example, except as a robber and an enemy, the despoiler of human love and joy; people to whom the inexorable march of the years and the pathos of mortality bring an inner deep resentment. We have all known individuals who have never been reconciled to life and providence since death or divorce came and took everything they had. And because they feel like that, they often give up the Christian faith, all the while forgetting that life was never meant to be a picnic, but a battle, with blood and sweat and tears. Christ came, not to make life easy, but to make us strong.

Many folk, even in a community such as ours, grow up without any true conception of what Christianity is all about. They look at the world, and they see harsh and cruel things happen. They see evil flourishing. They live in fear of nuclear bombs and global war. They are not fortified by a biblically-based faith in the sovereignty of God, nor do they know from experience the Transforming friendship of Christ. And what do they do? Too often they throw over Christianity without ever discovering what it really is.

3. Perhaps Thomas was missing that night because there was something radically wrong with himself.

a. Perhaps fear kept him away. In Jerusalem that weekend it was dangerous to be recognized as a friend of the Nazarene. The Jewish leaders were after the disciples’ blood. To be seen in the streets meant that you were taking your life in your hands. And maybe Thomas just decided to lie low and wait for the storm to blow itself out.

And fear still keeps many folk from a definite association with Christ and His Church. As I said in a sermon a few weeks ago they are afraid of becoming a “fanatic”, or of giving up their fun, or of losing their freedom. Or perhaps they are afraid to take their place in the fellowship of Christ because they feel that the demands of Christ are too stern and difficult.

It was G. K. Chesterton who exclaimed, “Some say, ‘Christianity has been tried and has failed.’ Nothing of the sort. It has been tried, found difficult, and given up.”

Or maybe the blunt truth was just this:

b. Perhaps Thomas’ own heart was not right. He may have become sour and

cynical. Perhaps something was twisting inside him and tainting his own life. How many there are like Thomas today! The doubts and difficulties and frustrations that so many people experience are caused by the very way they live.

A young man who claimed he could not accept Christianity because of his “intellectual difficulties” came once to discuss his problem with Dr. John Hutton, the famous English preacher. After a time, Dr. Hutton realized that there was more to the problem than met the eye; indeed, the lad was rationalizing. Suddenly Dr. Hutton looked him straight in the face and asked him this question: “Young man, are you having trouble with the Ten Commandments? The young fellow hung his head, and blushed, and soon a sad story of sin and failure came pouring out, and he made his confession and found peace with God as Dr. Hutton pointed him to Christ.

Let us make no mistake about it. Thomas was not present on that awesome occasion, not primarily because of Judas or Peter or any of the other disciples. Thomas was not present because of Thomas!

On this first Lord’s Day morning after Easter, is there any unforgiven sin in your life? If so, let Christ deal with it here and now. He can wash away every guilty stain and set you at peace with God and with your family and with yourself if you will allow him.

There was a day, it was the first Christmas Day, when Jesus was “Reported missing”; when, in heaven, there was a vacant place, because He had left “His throne and His Kingly crown” to come down into this poor, sin-cursed world of ours!

The story is told of a little chap strolling one evening with his father along a street in New York during World War I. In the window of one of the houses they passed there hung a large gold star. “What does that mean?” queried the little fellow. “It means”, replied his father. “that the people living there have given a son in the war.” A few moments later, the lad, looking up, saw in the clear sky above, a single star shining brightly. Tugging at his father’s coat sleeve, and pointing upwards, he exclaimed, “I say, Dad, I guess that means that God has given a Son!” Indeed, He has!

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Yes, Jesus was “reported missing” from His home in heaven. He came to earth to die upon a cross so that the “missing” might be missing no longer, neither from His fellowship on earth, nor from the higher, holier fellowship of heaven.

“O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.”

AMEN.