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**Absent Thomas**

**John 20:19-31**

**April 23, 2017**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the One who imparts God’s mission of reconciliation to His Church then as now, amen.

I wonder where Thomas was that first Easter evening when the disciples gathered together behind locked doors in the upper room… We commonly refer to the Thomas of this story as “Doubting Thomas” because he refuses to believe in Jesus’ resurrection until he sees for himself. I propose a different take on Thomas. Perhaps he should be called “Absent Thomas.” That’s what he was on that first Easter evening when all the other disciples were huddled together in fear. Thomas was out… well doing whatever it is that absent church members do on Sundays.

Warning! Please take the rest of this sermon in the context that I realize all the good works this congregation is already doing. Just this week our WELCA earned well over $1000 to be used for ministry by selling delicious chicken dinners. A big thank you to all who helped prepare and sell those meals and a huge thank you to all who purchased them. Also, please realize what we’re experiencing at Trinity is true across the ELCA and in all other mainline denominations. So, I ask you to put what I’m about to say into this context and ask yourself what could we do if our Absent Thomas’s were here with us…

I don’t know what Thomas was doing that first Easter evening. I’m not sure if he was playing golf, taking his kids to a soccer or baseball game or if it was planting season, but what I do know is he was not at church. Even on the first Easter, the Church had a missing member problem. I call it a problem because that is exactly what missing members are, a problem. I can’t help but notice that the story line much less the mission of the Church could not be advanced for an entire week until Thomas finally showed up and graced the other faithful disciples with his presence. When he did stop by the entire church had to go back over the same ground they had already covered the week before. Jesus had to come back into their presence and specifically address Thomas’ refusal to believe. When even a single member of the early church was absent the entire church was paralyzed. Nobody could move on to actually begin the mission Jesus had given them the prior week until Thomas returned and was on board with the rest. That was commitment. That was accountability. What do you suppose the conversation was like during the week among the disciples and between the disciples and Thomas? Do you think they just gave Thomas a pass? They said to one another, “Hey, Thomas probably had something important going on. Besides, it’s none of our business what he does or where he goes.” Something tells me Thomas was not given a pass. Something tells me his fellow disciples knew there couldn’t be anything more important than being together in the Lord’s presence. Something tells me they wouldn’t allow Thomas’ personal privacy stop them from impressing upon him the importance of his presence to complete the body of Christ.

Last week we had an attendance of 152 people. This week… well just look around… It’s not just here either. The ELCA has a little more than 3.6 million members across the US. Anyone care to guess how many are actually in a church on any given week? Average attendance per week is slightly over 1 million. I wonder where all the absent Thomas’ and Thomasina’s’ are this week. I imagine they had very important things to do. They have to meet their friends on the golf course. They have to make sure their kids get to soccer or baseball games. They may only have one day a week off and this is their only day to sleep in and rest. Where ever they are all those absent Thomas’ and Thomasina’s’ must be doing something important. Besides, it’s none of our business where they are or what they’re doing. They have their privacy rights. Who are we to question their faithfulness. Jesus said we shouldn’t point out the speck in our neighbor’s eye until we remove the log from our own.

While all those objections may be true, the fact of the matter is if the earliest church was paralyzed by a single absent Thomas, ***how much more are we hindered in accomplishing the Lord’s mission when almost two thirds of our faith community are missing on any given Sunday!*** When did the message of the Church become so mundane and commonplace that almost any excuse we can come up with is good enough to excuse absence from the worshiping community of Christ Followers? When did God’s gift of the Sabbath become a weekend away from our Lord and from each other? Without getting into worship wars, my own poor preaching, church disputes, or bad music, we must ask more fundamental questions. How important, how powerful is our need simply to be together?

Right about now you’re probably asking yourself why is Pastor Mel going on and on about absent Thomas to the disciples who are present. Well, here’s why. Somebody has to hold those who aren’t here accountable. Last week we had so many children present for the egg hunt and for our worship service it almost seemed like the good ol’ days. There were enough children in our midst that it should have dispelled all those rumors from people who say we just don’t have the children in our congregation any more. The truth is we do have them. The problem is their parents have chosen priorities other than Church and Sunday School attendance and nobody is holding them accountable.

My question for us who are present is this: What responsibility do we have to bring these absent Thomas’ back into the fold? Whose job is it to find out why they aren’t here and to let them know what they’re missing? Do we care enough about our Church to work towards eliminating the things that are preventing them from attending, and then welcoming them back when they do return? The early Christians obviously felt the presence of Christ in their gatherings but they experienced a kind of rare community, *koinonia*, they called it (Acts 2.42). Is there a way we can be accountable to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ? Would a simple call on a Sunday afternoon to say “We missed you” give an Absent Thomas a feeling they mattered to us? Our mission here at Trinity is to Seek, Welcome, and Serve all. None of this mission is possible with two thirds of our membership not present even as spectators. I assume when people join a church they do so to identify with the goals and values of the organization. They do so because the organization makes a difference in their lives and in the lives of others in the community and in the world. Our Absent Thomas’ have brought paralysis to a large part of our mission.

I’m not trying to make the faithful feel guilty. If guilt is the result of this sermon I have failed to make my point. My point is the missing in action, if not paralyzing to our mission, are certainly slowing us down. What’s more they are missing out on seeing the risen Lord and receiving His breath of life. My challenge to you is to ***not*** get paralyzed by guilty feelings, but ***let’s get energized!*** Let’s get closer and stronger together! The thing that broke the paralysis of those huddled up disciples was not only the encounter with Jesus, but His gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus blew into them. This was the same breath of God that blew across the waters of chaos in the beginning. This was the same breath that God breathed into the first man, Adam, to give human life its start. This was the same breath God breathed into all those dry bones that had come together as a result of Ezekiel’s prophesying from the Old Testament. This was the same wind that rushed into the crowd that had gathered for Pentecost when they all received the Holy Spirit. Do you know that feeling you have when you’re leaving this place after an especially inspiring worship? That’s the Holy Spirit breathing new life into your dry bones. That’s Jesus’ gift to you, empowering you to carry on in the mission God in Christ, and that Jesus in turn imparted to the Church (that’s us!).

Every email I send out ends with this line. “God’s Church doesn’t have a mission, God’s Mission has a Church.” God’s mission will be done, on earth as it is in heaven with or without us. May we find the time and strength to make God’s mission a priority in our lives. May we decide it is not acceptable for two thirds our brothers and sisters in Christ to be absent on any given Sunday and may we be bold enough to pray for them, to ask them why they aren’t coming, and then to act to eliminate those obstacles that keep people from being here with us and experiencing God’s life giving Spirit. May this congregation overcome the paralysis brought on by absent or rarely attending members. May God continue to bless the efforts of the faithful so those who are absent will see your good works and all people will give glory to God. Amen.