

**“Shoulda Been Here”**  
**John 20:19-31**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**March 30, 2008**

*“But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.” (John 20:24)*

Someone once gave me two tickets to a Dallas Cowboys pre-season football game. Thinking it would be a good father-son bonding experience, I took my six-year-old with me. It was 1986, and the Cowboys had just acquired the rights to Herschel Walker. I couldn't wait to see him. He had won the Heisman Trophy after a great career at Georgia, you know. He had set all kinds of records in the USFL. He was a certifiable superstar. And now he was a Dallas Cowboy! I can't tell you how excited I was. Half way through the first quarter, I saw Coach Landry call him to his side. I knew what was coming. So did everyone else in Texas Stadium. As he watched his team through the hole in the roof, God knew it too! A cheer went up as he started to put on his helmet. And then, as this amazing halfback took a step toward the field, Andrew tugged at my sleeve. “I gotta go,” he said. I turned and looked at my son. “Andrew, Herschel Walker is about to go into the game! He is going to take his first carry as a Cowboy. This is history. Can't you wait?” My first born just stared at me and said, “Dad, I really gotta go.” Everyone around me was trying really hard not to laugh. I was trying really hard not to cry. But you would be proud of me. I stood up, picked up my son, and headed for the concourse. And then, just as we were about to walk through the Men's Room door, a loud, wild, and sustained cheer went up. Then we heard the stadium announcer shout, “Touchdown!” Sure enough, when we got back to our seats, those around us were shouting, “You shoulda been here!”

I get the feeling that the disciples probably said something similar to Thomas. John said that he wasn't with the others that first Easter evening. Who knows where he happened to be. There have been all kinds of theories, as you can imagine. One of my favorites is summed up well by, among others, Elsworth Kalas. He notes that Thomas was a thinker, that he always tried to take the logical path. In the two other scenes in this gospel of which he is a part, he is always thoughtful in his responses. Now, three days after Jesus' brutal death, he was lost in thought. Kalas writes, “At times of grief, some

people seek the comfort of companions, while others seek the painful beauty of solitude.”<sup>1</sup> I have to imagine that Thomas was out there somewhere alone, wandering the hills, sitting under a tree lost in thought, or perhaps simply staring out into space trying to make sense of it all. I understand. There are a lot of times that it makes sense for me to just be by myself. And that’s fine. There is nothing wrong with solitude. But because Thomas was somewhere out there, because he wasn’t with the others on that Easter evening, he missed the appearance the risen Christ. When he finally had enough alone time, he decided to go and to be with the others. As he opened the door, there stood Simon Peter. With a smile the likes of which Thomas had never seen before, that very imperfect disciple said, “Shoulda been here, ol’ buddy.” He then went on to describe the experience he and the others had just shared, how Jesus came and stood among them, how in the midst of their brokenness and despair he offered them hope and peace, showed them his hands and side, and then breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Poor Thomas. He had missed the risen Christ.

Now I could go on to tell you about his so-called doubt. That is usually where sermons on Thomas move from here. I could tell you how he responded to Peter by saying, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas has gotten a lot of bad press down through the years for that statement. “Doubting Thomas” is now an accepted part of our vocabulary. But if we are honest with ourselves and with the scripture, then we will have to admit that he really didn’t ask for anything other than what the other disciples had already received. The way John tells it, Peter and the others did not believe until Jesus showed them his wounds. But Thomas has gone down in history as a doubter. And unfortunately, that is a reputation he has never been able to live down.

But as tempting it is to go that way for this sermon, that is not what I want us to look at today. There is another part of the story that also needs a good hard look from you and me. It has to do with that not-to-hard to imagine “Shoulda been here” comment that Thomas heard as he walked through that door. He shoulda, you know! While I do not

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<sup>1</sup> J. Elsworth Kalas, The Thirteen Apostles, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002, p. 79

fault him for his need to be alone, and while I totally understand what he was doing and why, it is obvious that it did not turn out to be the best thing for him to do. For it was within that gathered group of disciples, you see, that the risen Christ first appeared. William Barclay, the great Scottish Bible commentator, once wrote of Thomas:

*He made one mistake. He withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. And because he was not there with his fellow Christians he missed the first coming of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>*

“Because he was not there with his fellow Christians...” Please understand that this is not going to be a sermon about the evils of playing golf on Sunday morning or of going to your son or daughter’s sporting event during church time or of watching some televised worship service and claiming that it felt just as if you were in church. To be real honest, there are times that I would like to play golf or watch my kids play a baseball game on Sunday morning or just sit on the couch and fall asleep while pretending to watch Robert Schuller or whoever else is broadcasting their service that morning. But I have discovered that God rarely appears to me on the links or at the diamond or when I’m snoozing on the couch. More often than not, it is when I am with that gathered body of believers, otherwise known as the church, that I experience the presence of the risen Christ. Sometimes it happens when I’m serving communion, or when I’m baptizing a baby, or when I’m singing in the choir. Sometimes it occurs when I realize that God is somehow using the words of the sermon that I have prepared during the week to speak to you. But it most often happens when I am simply surrounded by others who believe, when I am in this gathered group of believers. And when it does I am ministered to in a way that I am not anywhere else. That is why Barclay goes on to write:

*We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ’s Church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow and sadness envelops us, we often tend to shut*

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 276

*ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of Christ's people, for it is there that we are likeliest of all to meet him face to face.*<sup>3</sup>

On the first Sunday in October of 2000, I stood before the congregation that I had served for the past five years and told them that my wife had left me. Other than having to break that same news to my two sons a few days earlier, that was the most difficult, most humiliating, most agonizing thing that I have ever done. On the one hand, I simply wanted to find someplace to hide, to crawl under some rock and stay there until it became yesterday's news. Yet on the other hand, with the exception of my mom's house, I could think of nowhere else I would have rather been. These were people who knew me, you see. We had eaten together. We had built a house of worship together. I had baptized their babies, married their children, and buried their parents. We were a family. And on that awful day, that congregation ministered to me. On that day they wrapped me in arms of love. On that day, in that gathered group of believers, through what they said and what they did and how they appeared, I experienced the risen Lord Jesus Christ in a way that I had never known before. And there was nowhere else on earth that something like that could have happened.

I'll be honest with you. Sometimes the church just drives me crazy. Sometimes this church just drives me crazy. The church makes way too many demands, it has far too many meetings, and sometimes it can be petty, dishonest, and just plain mean. Far too many people walk through its doors with agendas other than the one God has for our congregation. There are times when I just want to walk out the front door, find a place where I can be all by myself, and never come back again. I don't know if you know this, but this church is not perfect. It is far from being what it should be. But then that should come as no big surprise as there is not a church in the world that is. This church is a reflection of its pastor and its members, you see, and most of us are just plain nuts. Yet despite that fact, despite the many failings of both this pastor and the members, despite the fact that we spend more on debt reduction than we do on ministry, despite the fact

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 276

that we have a water problem with the south wall of the Family Life Center, a drainage problem with the shower in the women's room, and truly uncomfortable and claustrophobia-causing problem in that my office has no windows to the outdoors, it is here that the risen Christ becomes real to me. It is here that he holds out his hands, shows me his side, and says to me, "Do not doubt, Thomas, but believe." It is here, among this very imperfect group of believers, that I experience the risen Christ. And because that is so, I can assure you that there will never be a time when one of you will have to look at me and say, "Shoulda been here."

And knowing that, we can now get back to our story. John's gospel tells us that it was eight days later, on the following Sunday evening, that the disciples gathered once again in that upper room. There was no altar, no pulpit, no stained glass or pews in that room, but it was holy ground just the same. And this time Thomas was in that room with them. While they were all gathered in that one place, the risen Christ once again stood among them. Just like the previous week, Jesus began his time with them by offering a blessing, "Peace be with you." Then he turned to Thomas. I personally believe that the disciple known as the Twin had fallen on his knees long before Jesus ever turned to him. But when he did, the Lord surely must have smiled when he playfully said to him, "Put you're your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, Thomas, but believe." No one, not even his good Jewish mother, ever had to say to him again, "Shoulda been here."

I wonder if anyone will ever have to say those words to you?

The Book of Acts tells us that right after their release from prison, where they had been locked up for speaking the good news of the risen Christ, Peter and John went back to that upper room and reported their experience to the gathered group of believers, how the chief priests and elders had ordered them not to share the story of Jesus with anyone. After some discussion, those in that room joined hands and prayed together. Despite what they had been told by the authorities, they asked God to give them the strength to do what they knew was right. Luke tells us that right after their "Amen," "the place in which they

were gathered was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.”<sup>4</sup> From that point on, nothing in their lives, or in ours, was ever the same. For you see, whether it was back in that upper room or here in this sanctuary, where as few as two or three gather in his name, the risen Christ is present. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 4:31