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B E C O M I N G  
T H E  
C H U R C H

GOD'S PEOPLE IN  
PURPOSE AND POWER



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# 1

## IF YOU GET JESUS, YOU GET THE CHURCH

### THOMAS

That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." (John 20:19-29 NLT)

Those who know my story would probably label me a contrarian. I am one whose life with Christ demonstrates doing the opposite of what most would do. For instance, many so-called believers would never miss Resurrection Sunday. In fact, if they don't go to church on any other Sunday, they go to church on Resurrection Sunday, yet the following Sunday they are nowhere to be seen or found. Churches boast record attendance on Resurrection Sunday.

If you know my story, you know that I am the exact opposite. I was nowhere near the church on the first Resurrection Sunday. While I was one of the initial members of Jesus' ministry and I was consistent in my followership and service for the first three years of the ministry's existence, on the first Resurrection Sunday I was not

among the followers of Jesus. I was not found to be present in the fellowship of believers. On the most significant day of our existence as a body of Jesus-followers, I was not present.

In part, my absence was due to having experienced the most painful thing in my life just days earlier. On Thursday night, Jesus had been betrayed by one of our own, named Judas, falsely accused by dishonest witnesses, and mistried by the Sanhedrin Council. Early that Friday, he was examined by Pilate who found no wrong in him. But out of concern for the crowd and his political livelihood, Pilate sentenced Jesus to be crucified anyway. After Jesus had been brutally beaten, they crucified him. With each blow of the hammer to the nails in Jesus' hands and feet, my joy, hope, and faith were beaten to a pulp. It was the darkest period of my life, as I witnessed my hope painfully and publicly executed.

With Jesus being dead, I saw no reason to stay. Jesus was the reason I was in the group in the first place. I responded to Jesus' call to follow him. I was connected to the group due to their having received the same call. I didn't know the other eleven before Jesus. Jesus called us together. Our life together was due to our common acceptance of and life with Jesus. I wasn't there for them. I was there for Jesus.

Jesus was crucified. Jesus died. The only person who could raise anybody from the dead was dead himself. With

Jesus gone, there wasn't any reason for me to be there with them. I didn't get the church. I did not understand, then, that Jesus called us both to himself and to each other. He wasn't just calling us to be with him, but to be together with him and to be with him together.

## JESUS' BODY

I had yet to grasp that my commitment to him was intertwined with my commitment to them, and that his development of me was and would continue to be within the context of connection to a body of believers. I didn't understand the fact that I couldn't fully get him if I did not get his people. *You can't get Jesus without also getting his body, the church.*

I didn't get the church. I could barely take some of them with Jesus around. Jesus was what made some of them bearable. Peter was hotheaded and temperamental. James and John were power hungry, wanting to have the best seats in the kingdom. Judas was a covetous thief who was siphoning off our money for himself. Nathanael was a cultural purist who didn't think that any good thing could come out of certain environments. Simon the Zealot was always talking about revolution. The only one who made sense to me and who made my time meaningful was Jesus. Now, Jesus was dead. With his death, with his departure, I left. Who stays in a place where the treasurer sells the leader out for a few pieces of silver? Who stays after one of

the inner circle denies knowing his teacher, not once but three times? Who remains with a group that ran and left their Lord behind?

If I were being truly transparent, I couldn't put it all on the fact that I had suffered disappointment and disillusionment with Jesus' death and with Jesus' people, but I was also disappointed in myself. On that weekend, I really had a hard time looking at myself in the mirror. Everything that I could say about the others, they could say about me. I didn't live up to everything that I said I'd be or do

Leading up to the week that you all call Holy Week, there was the incident with Lazarus of Bethany. We got word that Lazarus was sick. Two days later, Jesus talked about going to raise Lazarus. We didn't have any problem with Jesus wanting to raise Lazarus from the dead, but we did have a problem with going to that area. The folks in Judea tried to stone Jesus the last time that we were there. We weren't feeling being stoned, but Jesus was persistent in going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Seeing that, I said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16).

I was the one who said that I wasn't going to let Jesus face anything by himself. I was the one who said that I'd go and die with him. Yet, when the time came to stand with Jesus in death, I fled like everybody else. I let myself down, and I let Jesus down. I didn't want to face the eyes of those who might look at me knowing that I didn't do what I so boldly said that I would do.



So I left. I left the fellowship. I “de-churched.” If you were to check the record, I was the first person to occupy the category of the de-churched. The de-churched are those who were once faithful to the assembled gathering of believers, who for one reason or another, exit the assembly.

I de-churched. Why continue in a group of messed up people? I could do bad all by myself. If by some miracle Jesus would rise from the dead, would he show up to the ones who let him down?

## A PLACE OF GATHERING

So I left. Hurt by life, disillusioned with others, and disappointed with myself, I de-churched. On the first Resurrection Sunday, when Jesus actually got up from the dead and showed himself alive, I was not there. With me absent, Jesus showed up where the body gathered was. While I had a problem with them, Jesus showed up where they were. Jesus showed up where the body showed up. To the fearful and the failed, Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up in the midst of the church keeping its commitment.

Though far from perfect, they kept their commitment. I had forgotten his words, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). He didn’t qualify the characteristics of the two or three. He did not call them perfect people. He did not say that they had to have it all together. It’s not their perfection; it’s his presence. It’s their commitment to gathering together in



his name. His presence makes up for their imperfection—their perfection is in him.

As faulty, flawed, and fearful as they were, they maintained their commitment to gather together in his name. Having gathered together in his name, Jesus kept his promise and made himself known in resurrection power and glory.

The wonder of the church is that it is the body through which God has chosen to make Jesus known and felt by the world. The fellowship of believers is the place where the promised presence of the Lord is most fully felt and found, where the people have the singular purpose of gathering together in the name of the Lord. Where there is a commitment to gather in his name, he is committed to making himself known, felt, and found. The distinction of the church is not in its facilities. It's not in its technology. It's not in its music. *Becoming the church involves appreciating that the distinction of the church is in the purpose of her gathering.* The church gathers together in the name of the Lord Jesus. The church gathers together for the purpose of the person and presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the commitment to gather in his name. It's not about the perfection of character. It's about the sincerity and consistency of the commitment to gather together in his name.

## **COMMUNICATING OUR CONFESSION**

It wasn't simply their commitment to gather together in his name, they were also communicating their confession.

Luke provides some information about what was happening: As they were talking about their experience with the resurrected Jesus, Jesus showed up. As they spoke about their experience with Jesus, Jesus showed up. As they were collectively talking about Jesus, Jesus showed up.

*Becoming the church is recognizing the uniqueness of the content of our conversation*—we have a confessional conversation. The church has a unique story to tell: We talk about the love of God in Christ Jesus displayed in the most graphic of terms. We talk about Jesus dying on a cross for the sins of the world. We talk about Jesus being buried in a grave. We dare to declare that Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive forevermore. We declare that he was seen by the women who went to the tomb; he was seen by the two on the road to Emmaus; he was seen by the Twelve; he was seen by more than five hundred followers before his ascension; he was seen by Paul on the road to Damascus; he was seen by John on the Isle of Patmos. We declare our having met him for ourselves. We declare what he's done in our lives.

In the midst of that conversation, the Lord makes himself known. He makes himself felt and found. There is a sense of him that is experienced whenever his people come together and talk about him. In the midst of their testimony, Jesus comes and confirms the truth of their confession. He is alive.

I was absent from the fellowship, and Jesus showed up and spoke peace to the people. He sought to calm their

fears, still their agitation, and resolve their tension. I missed that move—I needed that peace. I needed that stillness. I needed that resolution.

The church is the place of proclaimed peace. It is in the midst of the body gathered that the Lord shows up to speak peace. Before Jesus died, he willed his peace to us as we gathered together in the upper room. He said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Having willed his peace to us prior to his death, Jesus showed up to the church gathered on Resurrection Sunday and again proclaimed peace to those who were gathered.

The church is the place of proclaimed peace. It is in the presence of the Lord’s people that the presence of Christ is able to mediate a unique sense of peace that quiets, settles, assures, upholds, and sustains. There is something uniquely powerful when God’s people are together and a word of peace is declared and collectively affirmed and received.

## **PEACE AND PURPOSE**

Having shown himself alive to them, Jesus said to them, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Jesus spoke and clarified their purpose. They were apostles. They were to be sent persons. They were people with a mission. The mission was no less than the continuance of Jesus’ mission. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus was

sending us. The purpose of the group was assigned and clarified. But I was not present—I missed out on the assignment and clarification of my purpose in God. Our assignment was given within the context of our life together. *The church, being the place of expressed commitment, shared confession, and proclaimed peace, is also the place of assignment clarification.*

There are some levels of assignment and clarification that don't come in the isolation of your individuality. They come in the context of your existence within the body of Christ-followers. Jesus came to the upper room and let those who were there understand that their lives were to be lived missionally. They were on mission. They were on assignment. They were under orders. They were sent as Jesus had been sent. They were sent to continue the work of the kingdom of God. They were sent to continue the work of redemption.

I missed that experience. I needed to know what to do next. I needed to know the next steps of my life. I needed to know the rhyme and reason for the next things of God for me. I needed to know the flow and the stream wherein my life would now be lived.

The church is the place where God clarifies his assignment. In Acts 13, it's in the midst of the believers ministering to the Lord and fasting that the Holy Spirit assigns and clarifies Barnabas and Saul's purpose, saying, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). It's in the midst of the saints

that God can show up and reveal the next things of your life. It's in the midst of the Christ-followers that God can speak to you about the flow and stream wherein he has called you to walk. It's among the believers that God can remind you of the missional nature of your life. He puts you in remembrance that you are one who's been sent. He's saved you to live a sent life. You're under assignment and you're on a mission. There is no time in your life when you lack meaning and purpose. Every day of your life has meaning and purpose. Every day, there is an assignment. You are assigned to be the presence of the Lord wherever you are. You are assigned to be the incarnation of the love of God in the world.

There are times when life can throw you off track. There are times when things are not as clear as they once were. But it's in the midst of the body of believers that the Lord is able to show up and clarify. He shows up and lifts the darkness. He shows up and removes the scales. He shows up and dissipates the fog and the haze. He shows up with a word or a testimony that gives me an aha moment.

## **THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT**

To the body of disciples that I left, Jesus showed up and revealed himself to be alive, spoke peace, clarified his assignment, and breathed power. Jesus breathed on those who were present and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). The word for *breathed* is one that is used one

time in Genesis 2:7 where God breathed on Adam and he became a living soul. Here Jesus did the same thing to those who were in the room. He breathed upon them the Holy Spirit and told them to receive, take into themselves, and lay hold of the Spirit. He knew that they would need the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit to live the lives to which they were called, so he gave them a breath of the Holy Spirit. Before leaving, he would tell all of us to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father which was the Holy Spirit.

My friends, there is no way that you can live the lives of purpose to which you've been called in the natural. You can't do it on sheer intellect. You need spiritual power. You need the Lord to breathe on you. You need the Lord to give you power from on high. *Becoming the church entails the valuing of the church as the place where spiritual power is bestowed.* There's something about being in the midst of the body where the Lord has promised to be in the midst himself. There is a level of anointing that God provides within the collective body that you don't get individually. Every time that you gather together with other believers in the name of Jesus, you should come desiring and expecting the Lord to breathe upon you again. There should be a hunger and anticipation for the Lord to give you a fresh wind of the Spirit, which renews your strength in your inner person and gives you boldness to face an uncertain world one more time. You can't afford to live one

week without the power of God. In truth, you can't live one day without God's power.

I didn't get all that the church was or what I was called to become. Because of that, I wasn't there when Jesus showed up. Afterward, hearing them talk about the experience, I said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

I needed to experience what they experienced. I needed to see what they saw. I needed to feel what they felt. I desired to have what they had. So, I went back to them.

The next day came, and I was there. I was there, and Jesus didn't show. The next day came, and I was there. Jesus didn't show. I wasn't going to be dissuaded. I made up in my mind that I was going to be there. I wasn't going to be absent when the Lord showed up again. In fact, it took eight days before he showed up again.

There are times when the body is gathered and there may not be the experience of the pervasively tangible presence of God. Don't be fooled into removing yourself from the midst. The moment that you move may be the moment that the Lord shows up.

## **CONFRONTING AND CONVICTING**

On the eighth day, which would be the Sunday after Easter, Jesus showed up. This time, I was in the number. When he came, he spoke peace to us all. It was a peace that I needed



to hear. I was wondering if I had missed my moment. I was wondering if my chance had passed me by. He spoke peace to everybody including me. Then, he came up to me and spoke to me. In the midst of my doubt, in the midst of what I didn't get about him and his people, he showed up and directed his attention toward me.

He said, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27). This wasn't the time to address James or John. This was not the time to resolve Peter's issue. Jesus stepped up and spoke to my issue, my imperfection, and my sin. Everybody has an issue. Everybody has a hang-up. Everybody has something that Jesus could blast if he were so inclined. While others would have their days of confrontation, today was my day to be personally confronted by Jesus.

He came into the midst with me on his mind. He came with me on his agenda. He came to answer my questions. He came to build my faith. He came to change my perspective.

*Becoming the church is comprehending that the church is the place where God uniquely confronts us and convicts us. The church is the place where God is able to focus uniquely on one in the midst of all of the others who are gathered.*

With everyone else in the building, he will show up with you on the agenda. He will show up to answer your questions, to resolve your doubts, to calm your fears, to build your faith, to change your perspective.

Can you attest to the Lord having come in the midst and meeting you right where you are, coming as if you were the only one in the room? He sits down not just in your aisle, but in your seat. He gives you exactly what you need. In that moment, you can't help but be glad that you are in the number.

Jesus confronted me in my faithlessness, in my double-mindedness, in my skepticism and judgment of others. I was overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord. I was taken by the fact that the Lord would come with me in mind. I was totally taken by the glory of the Lord. The only thing that I could do was say, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Having been confronted, I was convicted. I came under the personal conviction of who Jesus is. He is my Lord and my God.

The only thing that I could do was praise the Lord. The only thing that I could do was offer the language of glory. The only thing that I could do was declare Jesus to be Lord and God. I'm so glad that I was there.

Jesus told me that I believed because I saw, but that blessed were those who would not see but yet believe. There are those of you in that category. You didn't get to put your fingers in his hands or your hands in his side, but you believe. You can talk about the church being the place where Jesus comes to confront you and to convict you. He confronts you with the truth of your sin. He convicts you of your sinfulness. He convinces you of the love of God demonstrated through his dying on the cross.

Having been confronted and convicted, you can declare your belief. You believe that Jesus died for you. You believe that God raised Jesus for you. You know the blessing of believing. You know the joy of believing. You know the peace of believing. You know what it is to have your sins forgiven and to have your life made brand new. You can testify about the blessing of believing in him. You've declared "My Lord and My God." Having gotten Jesus, you also get his church.

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