



This is “The Incredulity of Thomas” or “Doubting Thomas”. I first saw it a number of years ago when I was in Winnipeg the first weekend after Easter and attended Charleswood Mennonite Church with our kids. Harry Huebner was speaking that morning and he projected this onto the screen as we are doing today. But don’t worry, this is all that I remember from his sermon so I won’t be trying to repeat what he said. Although, by the time I’m done, you may be wishing I had remembered more of his sermon and shared it with you.

The artist who painted this picture was born Michelangelo Merisi, later calling himself Caravaggio. He lived from September 28, 1571 to July 18, 1610. He was an Italian artist active in Rome, Naples, Malta and Sicily.

Active in more ways than one. Though his work seemed to be guided by Biblical themes, a number of them focusing around Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection, Caravaggio was also known as a brawler. He would often get into fights, was said to have killed a man, and also spent time in prison for his actions.

I found little information about this painting itself, other than it is based on our scripture passage this morning which is the basis for Thomas being known as “Doubting Thomas”. It is intriguing to look at Jesus guiding Thomas’ dirty finger right into the wound on his side. Can you imagine him doing that? Did you ever think of this scene occurring just this way?

So, because there isn't much written at least not on the few websites I looked at on the Internet about this painting, we can only imagine some of the details that he has chosen to portray.

For example, we have these other two disciples but we have no idea who they are.

Of course, one might be Peter, who always seemed to have his nose in everything. Or maybe they are James and John, who had hoped to sit on the right and left sides of Jesus as he sat on his throne in his kingdom. They also may have needed to be in the midst of things.

But there's also Matthew or Levi, the former tax collector; Phillip or Andrew or Nathaniel. Or it could have been Judas, not Iscariot. Don't you feel sorry for that one? The only mention we have of him in the gospels is when he is listed as one of the disciples, and the only way to distinguish him is "not Iscariot". Of course, Judas Iscariot was the Judas who betrayed Jesus and who was believed to be dead by the time this scene occurred. So the writer of the gospel where the disciples are listed was kind enough to distinguish one Judas from the other.

So who do you think the one leaning over Thomas' shoulder might be? Any thoughts? Suggestions?

Invite person up to give reasons why this might be that person.

So who might the other disciple be? Come on up. Why do you think this is _____?

I wonder if we could do a live portrait of this scene. Would you mind posing as the person you suggested?

But we need someone to portray Thomas and someone to portray Jesus.

So Thomas, you're this guy known as Doubting Thomas. Think about how you might feel about that. And think about how you might be feeling right now as your finger is guided into the gaping hole in Jesus' side. And also think about how tradition suggests that you are the person who first took the gospel to India and how this event portrayed here might have played into that. Of course, you didn't know that at the moment of this event, but maybe Doubting Thomas isn't the best title for you.

Jesus, what are you thinking? Sticking Thomas' dirty finger into your side? Were you trying to humiliate him or educate him? What is going on for you?

Now I'm going to ask you to do one more thing. If you really don't want to do this, then maybe someone else will take your place, but I'll ask you to try to get into the character of the person you are portraying. You may need to move around a little bit, then come back into position and I'll interview you. Are you all okay with giving that a try?

Okay, now remember, this is you trying to get into the heart and mind of the person. I want to know what you are thinking and feeling in this situation. But first let me read the scripture passage for you once again.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Okay?

So (Peter or whomever the one disciple is) what do you make of this situation? Twice now, Jesus suddenly materializes in this room. That's got to be kind of creepy. I'm sure that you're not used to it by now. It must still give you a fright every time he does it. But last Sunday, Jesus showed up, breathed on you, told you to receive the Holy Spirit, gave you authority to forgive sins or to retain sins, and here he is perhaps appearing just for the benefit of Thomas who missed out last week or maybe just to reassure everyone in the room. Or maybe it was a planned time of worship or prayer. What are you thinking? What are you feeling? (And remember, there are no wrong answers)

(John) what about you? Same situation. Did you get to stick your finger into Jesus' side? Did you want to? What are your thoughts? How does it feel?

Thomas. Doubting Thomas. What do you think of that name? Is it unfair? Were you really doubtful? Who of us wouldn't want to see the proof for ourselves as well? How are you feeling about this situation? Having Jesus push your finger into his open wound? What do you think? Or what do you have to say about it?

And Jesus, what's really behind this? Are you trying to humiliate Thomas or just trying to help him believe? What are your thoughts and feelings?

Do any of you have anything else you want to say? Do you want to respond to any of the others?

Does anyone else have some thoughts around this? Do you identify with anyone up here? What do you think they might be thinking or feeling?

Well, thank you all for participating in this. Let's give them a big hand for being courageous enough to step out into something new, or at least to allow themselves to be dragged into something they weren't expecting. You can let me know what you thought of it afterward.

I'll take just a few minutes more to add a few more of my own thoughts on this story.

I should start by saying that I have an issue with labeling people. Like labeling Thomas as doubting Thomas. I suppose I'm a little two-faced on labeling as I don't seem to have any trouble with labeling Donald Trump. But then, maybe I think he's just asking for it.

But obviously, with Thomas there's more to him than just a doubter. Now maybe that's exactly what he was. We've probably all had our moments of doubt from time to time, and maybe we've even been called a "doubting Thomas" or called someone else that. I know that doesn't feel very good, does it?

One writer explored just what it was that Thomas was doubting. Was it the resurrection or the crucifixion? Remember, most of the disciples deserted Jesus when he was arrested. They may have been hiding in this upper room from the moment Jesus was arrested. Everything they know about last weekend may only be on the word of others. And maybe they all had doubts. Thomas was the only one brave enough to voice his own doubts. And of course, Jesus showed everyone else his wounds a week ago. He may not have stuck their fingers into the holes, but still he showed them to prove that everything they'd heard was true. He had been crucified. He had died and been buried. And he had risen from the dead.

And what do these appearances show us?

It seems that all the gospel writers needed to show a number of things:

First that Jesus had indeed died. That he had indeed risen from the dead. This story is intended to give proof to that.

But also, through various stories, the writers need to show that Jesus wanted to let the disciples and all his followers know that it was okay. Yes, they may have deserted him in his time of need, couldn't stay awake to pray with him and so were too weak to journey with him in his trial, flogging, crucifixion and death. But he hadn't given up on them. He forgave them and ensured them that they still had a place in his plan.

Taking Thomas' hand and guiding his finger into his wounds was a very intimate way of letting him know he cared. If you need proof, then here's the proof, but even more blessed are those who will believe the stories that Thomas and the others will tell about Jesus, without seeing or touching the wounded and risen body of Christ.

The gospels were written a long time after Jesus had left the earth and they continue to be told today as is evident by our talking about it now. All of us need to have the assurance that our faith is not in vain, that we believe in a crucified and risen Lord.

But there is more.

Jesus gives them the authority to forgive sins.

But as Jesus gives them the authority to forgive sins, he also tells them they have the authority to retain sins, or to refrain from forgiving sins. Even as he, himself, chose to forgive them rather than hold their desertion and lack of faith against them for eternity, so they, we are encouraged to do likewise. i.e. to forgive others.

Forgiveness is a big part of my daily routine. I encounter and work with people who are in constant need of forgiveness. They have committed far worse crimes than deserting their best friend or teacher in their hour of need. When I encounter them, some are extremely remorseful, they are in tears because they can't believe they did something that would actually destroy their lives or someone else's life. Because of their actions, someone has been harmed, family relationships are broken, they are ostracized by their community and they are looking for the right place to turn, looking for someone to walk with them to let them know it will be okay, even though they and we know that there is no way of really knowing that.

Last week, you heard in the news about one of our clients being arrested. He wasn't identified as one of our clients, but he was someone with whom we were working. And this week, I went to see him in the prison.

Of course, I wanted to slap him and ask him what he was thinking, but instead, what he needed was for me to listen to him and to let him know that I was there for him and that his circle would likely still be there for him. We were in no way condoning what he had done, and the truth is we were all devastated by the fact that he had not learned his lesson the first time and that he had not made use of the supports we were providing him. Instead, he got caught up in his past and made the same mistakes all over again. Maybe the system had let him down, but he knew that he had also let himself and everyone else down. And he knew it would be a long journey back.

Often, we hear the phrase "forgive and forget." But when it comes to forgiveness, I'm not sure forgetting is a good idea. Certainly not in the work I do. Yes, we can forgive, but we also need to be diligent in holding our new friends accountable while we support them so that instances like what resulted in our client's arrest, don't happen.

And this story of Jesus, Thomas, and the other disciples is a good example of that. In appearing to them, Jesus, without really saying anything specific is letting them know that he knows they regret what they had done. But he comes to them as a friend, as one who he has forgiven them. As one who is ready to move on. And that's his message to them and to us. No matter what may be in the past, let's move on, let's go forward and share the love and grace and forgiveness of God with one another.

That was his message on Easter Sunday, that was his message a week later, and it's been the message that has been proclaimed ever since, even to today and of course it will be his message throughout all eternity. And so, having breathed on them and us, the Holy Spirit, he sends the disciples and all his followers forth with his message of love, of forgiveness, of mercy and of grace.

So let us go from here, proclaiming and living that same message. Amen.