

Sermon – Easter 2 – Ascension, Rockville Centre

John 20

One of the great gifts that we have as citizens of the world is the body of work that represents the artistic expression of so many people. Women and men through the ages have expressed themselves and their deepest emotions through creating works of art. They have also expressed their interpretation of significant events in our world.

One historic artist who consistently reveals to me an astute and sensitive interpretation of scriptural events is Michelangelo da Caravaggio, the early 17th century Italian artist. In 1602 Caravaggio set about to paint his interpretation of Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus, the subject of today's gospel.

Doubting Thomas is the name of the painting. Doubting Thomas is also a name that we give to those people who express doubt about various aspects of life. I feel this is quite unfair to Thomas. Like we are oft to do we have labeled this poor man because of his honesty.

Caravaggio's interpretation of the encounter between Jesus and Thomas is intense, yet sensitive and intimate. The artist mostly painted full-bodied subjects set against rich backgrounds. In this painting however he has chosen to zoom into the subjects as if to emphasize the core of the encounter between these men.

The painting depicts Thomas at the center, Jesus to the left and two other disciples behind them. The figures fill the scene and the background is bare and in dull shadow. The light, so important to Caravaggio, streams over the shoulder of Jesus to light the faces of the disciples, leaving his face in shadow.

Jesus stands partially naked as he draws his garments away from his chest to reveal his torso. His head is bowed in an almost submissive pose, and his left hand, nail wound clearly visible, gently guides Thomas' arm. Thomas is crouched over, his head level with Jesus' chest. The light radiates off his furrowed brow, his eyes wide open in seeming disbelief at his experience. Thomas extends his finger and inserts it into the open spear wound on Jesus chest. His action causes the wound to separate and the top to lift up as his finger moves into Jesus chest up to the first knuckle. There is no blood evident just an open wound.

The other two disciples similarly bend forward to witness this incredible, intimate moment, brows furrowed, eyes firmly transfixed by Thomas' inserted finger. None of them recoil rather they appear to bow before Jesus in loving submission to his, and their vulnerability.

The painting is incredibly powerful and conveys the intense courage of Thomas to accept Jesus' invitation to touch his wounds. The intensity of the scene comes from his delicate touch. Jesus wanted Thomas to touch his risen body and feel the wounds of violence

inflicted on his flesh rather than just look at them. For me the painting of this act by Jesus reveals his loving forgiveness of Thomas and the disciples for abandoning him to the violence of the state.

These wounds inflicted on Jesus on the hard wood of the cross remained on his new risen body to provide the evidence that he indeed was the same Jesus that they had known and followed, and then had died at Calvary. Other accounts of Jesus resurrection tell us that the risen Jesus was not recognizable to the disciples and to Mary but became known once they engaged him and began speaking with him. In John's account, Jesus raised and scarred, appears amongst them even though the door was locked. Nano science might someday explain this, but for us and our faith we have to rely on the witness statements from the disciples. Jesus body was in a temporal state between earth and heaven, a physical body in transition.

As people of faith we are constantly in transition both in our physical and spiritual lives. We are all moving from our earthly existence to lives reunited with Christ, however that might occur. Our lives of faith ebb and flow between times of immense certainty in what we believe and times of unsettling doubt as we become overwhelmed or troubled by what we see and experience in the world.

When we see or experience justice, the intimacy of love, peace, reconciliation and the beauty of creation, along with our experience of the holy Eucharist and the revelation through scripture, we can be assured of God's active presence in the world all about us. When we see or experience injustice, hate, discrimination, the devastation of tornados and hurricane, or the tragedy of famine and waste and the destruction of cultures and our ecology we might despair that God seems so far away, or worse does not exist.

How can we therefore reconcile one with the other? How can we reconcile the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, the long promised Messiah, submitting to the violence of the state, being abandoned by his disciples and succumbing to death in such a horrific manner. We can only reconcile these disparate experiences as Thomas did. His courage to name his doubt led him to this intensely personal and intimate encounter with the risen Jesus. Jesus did not just reveal himself to Thomas he invited Thomas to touch him and to be in him as Caravaggio depicted so brilliantly. We can reconcile faith in the risen Lord by these accounts of his resurrection and reunification with his disciples.

We could come to understand that Jesus might have wanted nothing to do with these people again since they abandoned him in his most trying hours. Not only did Judas betray him and Peter deny knowing him, they all participated in these acts by abandoning him.

We could also understand the apprehension of the disciples as they were confronted with the risen Lord in a locked room. The power of such an act might have meant Jesus had come back for retribution for what the disciples did. However, when Jesus appears to them, instead of anger and loathing, he offers them peace. "Peace be with you," he says.

This offering of peace sets in motion the cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation, first for the disciples and then for the world. They are to be commissioned to carry this act of forgiveness to the world and to teach it to others. Our lives today benefit from the offering of these four words by Jesus in that locked room that night. Peace and forgiveness comes to all of us and we are asked to pay it forward.

Faith is carried forward on forgiveness and love, and from forgiveness and love comes our faith. Jesus starts this cycle of forgiveness not by commissioning the blameless or the most worthy people, but he commissions those who truly know that they have been forgiven.

Thomas might just be the most redeemed for having the courage to express his doubt openly and then accepting the peace and forgiveness offered by Jesus who he then claims as his Lord and his God.

Our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is to first know how wrong we have been in our lives and how much we are loved and forgiven. Only we can understand how this intensely intimate forgiveness plays out in our own lives. How unworthy we might feel because of our own abandonment or denying of Jesus.

We could all put ourselves into this Caravaggio painting taking Thomas' place as we carefully have our hand and finger guided towards the open wound on Christ's chest and then realizing how real the risen Jesus is for us. That sense of apprehension and amazement would be etched on our faces for all time as well.

When we express doubt we are acknowledging our humanness and our faith. Paul Tillich, a 20th c theologian from NYC said "severe doubt is confirmation of faith." Thomas' example helps us to live into this transition to a deeper faith and embrace our own doubt. Through the work of reconciliation and grace offered freely by God we can become drawn to declare for ourselves that Jesus is indeed "my Lord and my God."

In doing so we will experience the blessing of forgiveness that will enrich our lives of faith, especially as we pay it forward to love and forgive others. God raised Jesus from an early death to bring peace and forgiveness to the world one person at a time. Today you might be that person.