

SERMON- 2nd Easter (Year C)
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Acts 2:14a,22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

St. Timothy's Herndon
April 27, 2025

John 20:19-31 Psalm 16

OPENING:

On my day off, to get away from email and to kind of press reset, I like to go into DC and go to the Smithsonian. I did that this week with the National Gallery, problem is that it's all religious art...

The Sunday after Easter can land with a bit of a thud:
less fanfare,
less flowers,
less music
less people.

The Readings, however, grab us by the lapels and challenge us:
to examine how we respond to the Easter story
by *reminding* us how the disciples responded to the Easter event.

What I would like to do this morning is walk through some of those responses,
with the magic of our screens,
to see what they have to give us a few examples of discipleship, of how to respond
to the Easter proclamation

SLIDE ONE: Peter and the Beloved Disciple

First example we read that Peter and the Beloved Disciple (notice how handsome he was, there are all sorts of memes out there, about the flex that he had by saying that he was the one who Jesus loved, and he definitely ran faster than Peter) had discovered the Empty Tomb, with the strips of linens and no corpse.

In a perfect world, with perfect disciples, that empty tomb, should have been enough. The events had proceeded just had Jesus had prophesied, he was to be crucified, buried and resurrected after three days.

But it was not enough: there was no accompanying reaction of faith or belief. All we hear of, in John's account, is a gathering in fear, behind locked doors. Perhaps they had plans to spread the word, to start the Christian mission, but it seems that they were, at the very least: in a state of shock, scared because the authorities were looking for them, or maybe just profoundly sad because of the death of Jesus.

SLIDE TWO: Mary and *Noli Me Tangere*

Next, John reports that Jesus *appeared* to Mary Magdalene, with instructions to inform the rest of the disciples of the appearance. Again, in a perfect world, with perfect disciples, the news coming from Mary Magdalene should have been enough to convince the disciples of the good news. But we also don't hear how Mary's news affected the disciples. All we hear is that image of the Disciples, huddled together in a locked room. If the Passion Narrative were the Disciples' Final Exam, then these post-Resurrection scenes were Summer School, remedial work, and they seemed to have failed that test as well. To be fair, their reaction to the Easter story is consistent with the disciples' behavior throughout the Gospels, and we should recognize it a reflection of our own behavior and faith lives.

SLIDE THREE- 12 Disciples

The two figures who, other than Jesus, stand out in the Passion Narrative are Judas and Peter; we could also look at them as the two contrasting poles of Christian discipleship.

Most of us, though, are somewhere in the middle of the discipleship spectrum, away from those two poles, closer to Thomas, the disciple who figures most prominently in our reading today.

Who is Thomas? Who is this person who bursts on the scene so memorably? We really don't know him, he is just one of the 12 but, in another sense, we *do* know Thomas because we share his Modern, 21st century view of how he obtains and processes information, how he determines the Truth: "Trust but verify" "Put it in writing." Thomas would have fit in well with today's juries who demand CSI-like precision in court cases.

Thomas required the "grossest and most palpable evidence"—neither a substitute body nor a spirit, but flesh/blood DNA.

"Just the facts": *Dragnet*

surprisingly Jesus, unlike how he rebukes Mary for touching him, "accept(s) the challenge of physical investigation" and says he is willing to undergo this autopsy.¹

¹ Barrett, C. K. 1978. *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Westminster. 572.

SLIDE FOUR: Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Thomas*

This is the famous depiction of the scene by Caravaggio, the famous Italian painter of the 17th century (also on the front of your bulletin).

This painting has probably influenced our conception of the moment more than anything other than John's account itself.

Painted in 1601, Caravaggio brings his own genius, his own values and his own context to play in the work.

Caravaggio, interestingly, was a contemporary of Galileo, and lived through the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century.²

During that time, there was the emphasis on experimentation, on man's quest for knowledge, on the ability of mankind to understand the natural world.

We see that in the painting as Caravaggio brings Thomas, not Jesus, into the center of the frame, humanism by definition.

Jesus, meanwhile, is left-of-center, his face obscured by shadows—in a way unknowable to us.

In such a reading, Thomas becomes the hero, the person willing to go to whatever lengths he had to in order to determine the reliability of the Resurrection.

He is the modern searcher, the inspector, the detective, sent back in time on our behalf to perform the dirty work for us.

Another way to look at it, to experience the *pathos* of the event, is to concentrate on the furrowed brow of Thomas and the disciples, to contemplate his own woundedness and brokenness. Notice how Jesus's hands take Thomas's and draw them near to him, and the long line that extends to Thomas' elbow becomes the lance that pierced Jesus' side. Then look at how Thomas, when he feels Jesus' wound is also clutching his own side with other hand, understanding then his own pain and grief.³

These are all particular ways to look at it and Thomas has through time, become almost a vessel for our interpretations.

“Doubting Thomas”

or the rehabilitated – “Believing Thomas”

or the curious designation, I have always found this one intriguing, “Thomas the Twin- The Double.” Jesus' Mirror Image. The human side of the God-man

² Lorenzo Pericolo. 2014. “Interpreting Caravaggio in the Second Half of the 20th Century: Between Galileo and Heidegger, Giordano Bruno and Laplanche” in *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*. Pericolo, Lorenzo & David Stone, eds. Surry, UK: Ashgate. 306-7

³ Alex García-Rivera. “Aesthetics.” 2006. *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*. De La Torre, Miguel A. and Edwin David Aponte, eds. St. Louis, MO: Chalice. 104.

SLIDE FIVE: Rembrandt

Of course in John's account, the significance is that Thomas did not thrust hands into sides of Jesus. Let's go to the reading again:

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, without hesitation or going through with his request: "My Lord and my God!" he delivers the most accurate, faithful, the best description of Jesus in all the Gospels

We like that Rembrandt here gets the story "right" but that's because as a culture we continue to be gripped by such a demand for accuracy. The proliferation of TV shows and academic seminars related to the "search for Jesus" show that we are still right there with Thomas. And that's not a horrible thing, we are still searching, still looking for the scar. It's a reminder at the very least that we are no better or worse than the disciples themselves.

It's ironic though, at the very least, because John's reading has an explicit critique of that sort of proof: "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe."

In other words the stories are important, otherwise John would not have written them, but faith "proves" them, it's not automatic (remember last week), that's the nature of this sort of "proof."

SLIDE: CONCLUSION

Confirmation class: 24 eyes staring at back you: I am out of practice with it. Not disbelieving. Just they want me to prove it somehow. I can't. We can't, other than in our witness and our testimony, in my case in my preaching, by the way I live my life.

The final image that I will share with you, is kind of grainy, regrettably so, but also somewhat appropriate.

This is taken from a modern prayer pamphlet used in the Town of Ortona, Italy which is home to St. Thomas's relics. Here, the figure Christ is replaced by the Holy Shroud, the Shroud of Turin—that object which has been the focus of so much modern attempts to "prove" Jesus' existence using forensic evidence. Here it becomes the fabric that Thomas probes with his outstretched hands.⁴ There was no explanation or attribution given with this image—and I think the idea is something like: this is who we are, still poking and probing through our doubt, aching for contact with the Risen Christ. **AMEN**

⁴ Bena, 77.