

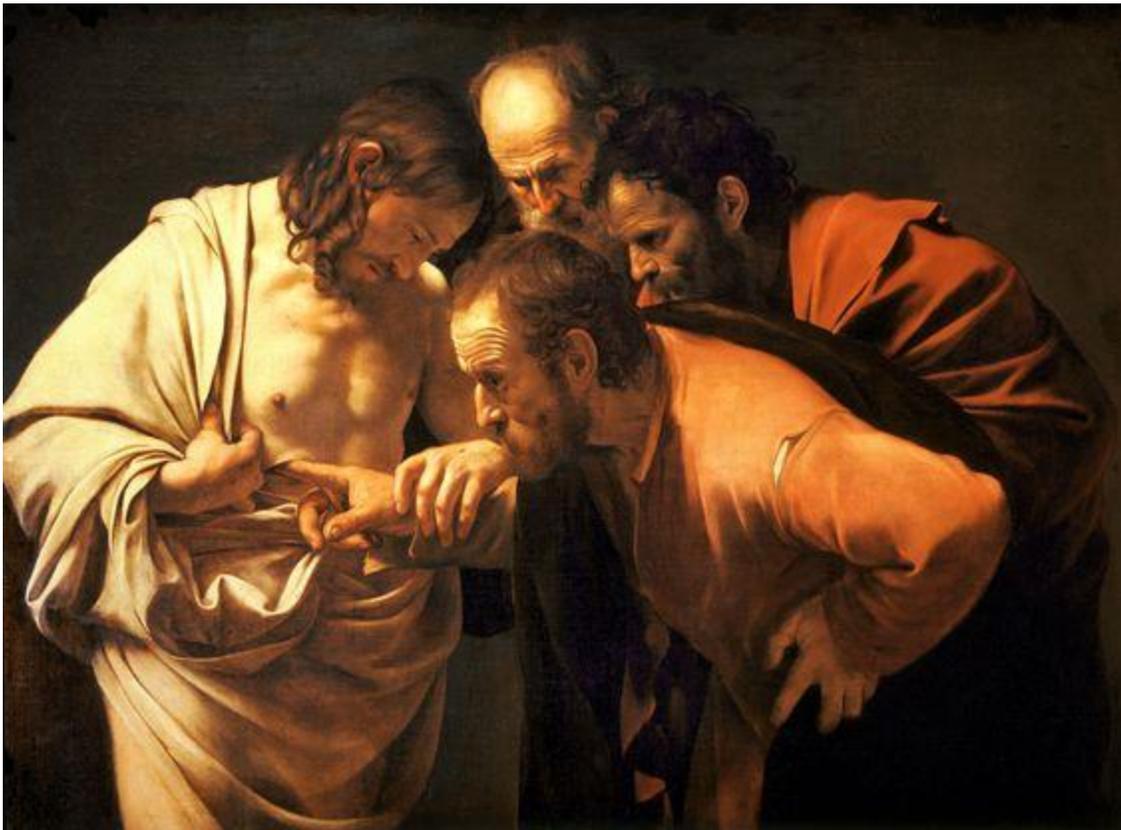
“Whose Twin?”

April 23, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Second Sunday of Easter, Year A

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

-- John 20:24-25 NRSV



(Image credit: Caravaggio, “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas,” circa 1602-1603)

Wow . . . Thomas is the foremost example of choosing the *wrong* Sunday to miss church! Poor Thomas, the doubter . . . It is a tough wrap. The scriptures from John’s gospel indicates he had a twin – who might that have been, I wonder . . . Hmmm?

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

As we ask for prayers this day, we should remember all those students everywhere, but particularly in the universities and colleges, who are staring down the barrel of final exams this week and next! These are stressful days for a lot of them.

Let me share an exchange of emails between me, the professor, and one of those students at Robert Morris University where I "profess"! The student's name happens also to be John.

This past Friday, I wrote the following to all of my students in both classes I teach there:

Dear HUMA 1010 Student in Prof. Silbert's sections only:

Some of you have not turned in work that is due. The deadline for all of this work technically passed on Wednesday, April 19.

Please check to see that you have turned these items in:

The Museum Paper -- due March 31

The Music Planning Project -- due April 12

and

The Belles-Lettres Project (detailed on the last page of the syllabus) -- due April 19

I will accept these papers, no later than Monday, April 24th, at class time. I will deduct late points for both the Museum paper and the Music Planning Paper. However, I will accept the Belles-Lettres Paper on Monday with possibility for full credit. I will not accept any work after this date, no exceptions.

*It's your move,
Professor Silbert"*

Barely half of an hour passed when I received the following from John:

Professor Silbert,

I have turned in all of those assignments in to you on the original due dates. I'm uncertain if you sent this email to the whole class or just people with missing work, so if there is something you have as missing could you notify me?

*Thanks,
John*

Here was my response to him:

John:

I did not want to single out individuals -- that is not my style. This went to the whole class, but was redefined in the body of the text as "Some of you . . ."

You are entirely up to date. My hope is that this communication is a subtle prod to the few who, for whatever reason, are in arrears (this is a good word; look it up).

I didn't have to send the Email, but I also know, beyond any shadow of doubt, I have given everyone notice. By sending this to "everyone/some," I am making my point, but not trying to track down individuals; I don't have that kind of time.

*See you Monday in class,
Prof. S.*

The humorous aspect of this, of course, is that John is a student who has a sterling academic record; on a 100 point grading system, he will probably earn 106 or 107 points! His "A" is assured; still he needed some bit of reassurance in all of this . . . Don't we all.

This is an interesting development when we consider the story of Thomas. He, too, was looking for a word that he could trust; he needed to see things for himself; he really did pick the wrong Sunday to miss church! But while the rest of his companions waited behind locked doors on Easter, for fear of those in power, Thomas was not with them. I suspect he was beginning to pick up the pieces of his shattered life and starting to move on.

Thomas was a realist . . . He looked things straight in the face without flinching. We know of Thomas' character in at least two other references before this one in John's gospel. The first of these is back when Jesus had had a rough time of it in Jerusalem; he and his disciples had been stoned by angry crowds and had left the area. Yet Jesus received word of the desperate illness of his friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha in Bethany, close by Jerusalem. (The story is found in John 11:1-44)

Jesus indicated he wished to go back there to them, but the others with him were worried about the angry air there. John tells us what Thomas said in the midst of this debate as he writes, *"Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'"* Thomas knew what the stakes were in going, he had counted the cost and was willing to lay down his life . . . Curiously, Thomas is the one that is often called "doubting" Thomas! This passage from John 11 argues very differently.

In another place, we see Thomas revealed in pragmatic and critical terms. Turn to the opening verses of John 14. Jesus is talking about going away to prepare a place for his disciples to come to him:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4And you know the way to the place where I am going.' 5Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' 6Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'"

(-- John 14:1-7, NRSV)

Thomas is a good disciple, like my good student, John. He was simply making sure he knew what the parameters of the assignment were; he wanted to do his due diligence; he wanted to be prepared with a map, if necessary, in order to be in the right place and on time.

These are not the actions of a doubter. These are the actions of someone who is deeply committed, but who wants to make sure he gets it right. And so when word comes that Jesus has risen from the dead, he wants to see this for himself . . . Can you blame him? I can't.

A question not asked by the Scriptures today is this "Whose twin is Thomas?" In the ways I try to live out my discipleship to Jesus I behave a lot like Thomas in the questions, in wanting to get it right, in trying to count the cost, in wanting to see it for my own eyes . . . I am Thomas' twin. How about you?

I included the great painting by the Counter-Reformation painter, Caravaggio, on the cover of the bulletin (and the sermon manuscript). It is called "*the Incredulity of Saint Thomas*", painted over a two or three year period in 1601-1603. It is a worthy image considering our topic today! And I find myself in agreement with the Reverend Katharine Hinman in speaking of it:

"One of my favorite paintings is Caravaggio's 'The Incredulity of Thomas.' In it, Jesus appears to Thomas and Thomas is leaned over looking intently at Jesu's wounds as he thrusts his finger into Jesus' side. But what is especially striking to me is that in this painting Jesus is not viewing Thomas accusingly. He has no expression on his face that says, 'There! Are you finally satisfied? What does it take to convince you?' Rather, Jesus is looking down at Thomas and guiding his hand into the hole in his side. He offers himself as physical proof." (-- The Rev. Katherine Hinman, in "The Faith of the Doubter")

Do you notice? Jesus guides Thomas' hand to the wound in his side, and Thomas is bent over and following through . . . But look at the others . . . They, too, seem equally attentive and perhaps, more so -- after all it was Thomas who demanded the proof, but since Jesus is willing to provide it, these others also lean in with wide-eyes of wonder!

On the second Sunday of Easter, especially if we missed church last week, we are people that are in search of reassurance in our discipleship with Jesus; a bit of proof that what we have heard is true! That Jesus is risen from the dead and is alive! Thomas is my twin, you see, for he is not about an idle word or a momentary gush of emotion; he seeks the truth of it for himself and Jesus meets him completely; and by this Thomas is transformed. Falling on his knees before Jesus, Thomas proclaims fully, *"My Lord and My God!"*

Thomas is the twin of anyone who seeks to make of Easter not just a day of celebration, but to make of it -- and of its Risen Lord -- a way of life . . .

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.