**Readers’ Notes**

*The Incredulity of St Thomas by Caravaggio (1601-2). Oil on Canvas.
Sansoucci Palace, Potsdam, Germany.*

This painting depicts an event which is found only in John’s Gospel, in John chapter 20, and has been depicted in art since at least the 5th century. In the Bible it happens just over a week after Jesus’ resurrection.

Let’s hear a bit of the text:

24Now Thomas (also known as the twin), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.25So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “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.”
26A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 27Then 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.”
28Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”
29Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The Greek word for ‘not believing’ is often translated as doubt, as it is here, but doubt isn’t the same as not believing, nor is doubt the opposite of faith.

All four Gospels include stories of the disciples being afraid, doubting, of not believing, of being confused and astonished. After the resurrection Mary Magdalene didn’t recognise Jesus – she thought he was a gardener, nor was she allowed to touch him unlike Thomas here. In Luke’s Gospel when Jesus appeared after his death - the disciples were terrified and thought he was a ghost. The Emmaus disciples walked *12 miles* with Jesus without recognising him. And we’ve just heard that the doors were locked. Of what or whom were the disciples afraid?

In the history of Christian thought, Thomas has often been judged by his lack of faith rather than by his honesty. Yet he only asked for what the other disciples had already experienced.
To want to see Jesus again is not about doubt but about *relationship*. So when Thomas says he won’t believe unless he *sees and touches* Jesus for himself, what he’s saying is that he wants his own experience and relationship with Jesus. Don’t we also?

Yet as we hear later in this passage, Thomas doesn’t need to touch Jesus after all – he only needs to see and hear him, because when he does he exclaims: ‘My Lord and My God’.
It never says that Thomas *touched* Jesus and only then did he believe. This declaration of faith is unique. Now, no other disciple in any of the Gospels expresses their faith in Christ in this way. When Simon Peter says: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God* this isn’t the same as saying: *My* *Lord and My God –* this is more radical, more personal and it connects the beginning of John’s Gospel with its end because *The Word that became flesh and dwelt amongst us* happens again right now after his resurrection.

Jesus says “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” While this seems as if Jesus is asserting the significance of those who have faith without needing physical evidence, he was keen to show Thomas his wound, and let him feel it. Jesus isn’t a resurrected ghost of his former body - he really was present in his flesh enabling this extraordinary miracle to take place. And this has been commonly interpreted as biblical encouragement to benefit from physical experiences in our faith such as pilgrimages, the veneration of holy relics and the contemplation of religious art.

Whereas we might tend to think this new beatitude of Jesus - “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” snubs Thomas’ faith, in fact it provides a new understanding of this encounter. Jesus is speaking to, but also, beyond Thomas – to the future generations – including you and me. We know that John wrote this Gospel long after Jesus had died so his readers weren’t first-hand witnesses. John’s audience was the future church. We are blessed in our faith today if we believe without seeing Jesus.

So why believe? We’ve not put our fingers in Jesus’ side. We’ve not seen him recently alive from the dead. We never saw him before he died. It’s important that the first disciples bear witness to the risen Jesus. But we don’t believe in the resurrection simply because they say it happened. We are not *just* disciples from an inherited faith – God always speaks to us in the present tense. Faith is handed down, but it is not second-hand.

So why then does Caravaggio paint Thomas as touching Jesus when the text doesn’t actually say this? How else would we recognise which one is Thomas here?

Notice that Christ doesn’t have a halo. Caravaggio deliberately does this to emphasize his humanity rather than his divinity as the risen Christ. All the post-resurrection experiences with Christ were real, visible, and accessible through the bodily senses. Caravaggio shows us this by making the resurrection as real as possible in his painting. Christ is not a spirit or ghost but a *complete* human being who: meets, greets, talks, fishes, blesses, eats and walks with people after he has died. This is the miracle of miracles.

Caravaggio's skill lies is in the detail: see the ripped seam on Thomas' faded clothes, and dirty fingernails to stress his poverty and Christ’s empathy with the poor, look at Christ’s anatomical perfection compared with the disciples’ bulk, then the elaborate folds of Christ’s shroud-like garment - swaddling or funereal or the womb and the tomb – birth and death in one body, and the different but equally astonished expressions in the disciples’ faces.

Although Thomas has been a very popular art subject since the 5th century, Caravaggio's painting surpasses all other depictions because he combined human realism and anatomical precision with access to the divine. Out of all Caravaggio’s paintings this one was copied the most - 22 times in his short lifetime.

Now notice the Gothic style archway formed by the outline of the four figures compacted into a dark background. Christ's head is largely in shadow, since he is the person who is least knowable to us humans, the viewers. Thomas shows profound surprise as his index finger delves into Jesus' wound. He appears to clutch his side as if he’s also become aware of a wound at his side. But who are the other disciples? The disciple at the head of this cluster is probably St. Peter – who becomes the head of the Church.

The disciple crouching to our centre right is probably John, the beloved disciple. Dressed in a sacrificial red robe, this is the same John in another Caravaggio painting of this period. Caravaggio knew that John would be especially interested in seeing the wound in Jesus’ side since the wound is near to Jesus’ chest where John lovingly had placed his head at the Last Supper. Within the shadows of Christ’s face, Caravaggio has tucked Jesus’ hair behind his ear so that we also can see his face, and we see Christ’s poignant tender gaze at his own body. It is very rare in art to see a painting where Jesus is looking at himself.

Both John’s Gospel and Caravaggio offer us a gentle Christ as he guides Thomas' right hand, to touch his wound. Jesus is gentle but the disciples have appalling manners. Their curiosity is undisguised – they are theologically and physically gobsmacked, each frowning with intense concentration, and no restraint as they continue staring at Jesus’ wounds. Nor do they seem to be in any hurry to stop gawping at Jesus - but then this is no ordinary event is it! This is a moment of self-revelation on Christ’s part and of revelation of self on the disciples’ part. To realize the unrealizable, to bring this miracle within the immediate grasp and understanding of everyone is the genius of both John’s Gospel and Caravaggio. We weren’t there but we can be sure from this text and this painting, that the resurrection was, and is, real. So our final response to Jesus’ beatitude might be: Blessed are those who doubt for they shall be surprised.
Amen.