

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Kevin Heider The Faith & Doubt of St Thomas, Part I

Hey everybody, my name is Kevin Heider. I am a singer-song writer, performer, and recording artist. I also work with videos, graphic design. I have a podcast. I like the arts. I enjoy all things creative.

Normally a video that's this grainy and low-quality would bother me a bit, but I'm not too worried about it here, because I'm actually not going to be on the screen much longer; you're welcome. I'm going to disappear, and the rest of this video, both part one and part two, you'll be looking at a work of art that we're going to reflect on. And if that seems super cheesy and lame to you, please give it a shot. I am a storyteller at heart, and that's something that I've really come to appreciate more about Christ. He was a storyteller. He communicated transcendent truths through parables. In some of his more well-known stories, characters are murdered or they're beaten and left for dead. They're handed over to be tortured. A man abandons his family and squanders all of his money. It's pretty dark stuff at times. But the darkness isn't the point. Through the art of storytelling, Christ sometimes descends into darkness in order to reveal the light.

And that's what interests me. -That contrast, light and dark, faith and doubt, the garden and the desert. That's what we're going to explore. In this presentation, we are going to dive into a work of art, a painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, better known simply as, Caravaggio. We're going to sit with it, meditate on it, and I'm going to draw your attention to certain details, so we can consider what spiritual and psychological insights they reveal. Because at its best, I think art is a mirror. When we allow ourselves to enter into it, to really gaze upon it, art can reflect some part of ourselves back to us.

So now, I'm going to disappear, and what I consider to be Caravaggio's masterpiece will become our focus. With a hope and a prayer that the light may be revealed, let us descend into the darkness. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. To you, O Lord, I lift my soul. My God, in you I trust. Make known to me your ways, Lord. Teach me your paths. Guide me by your fidelity and teach me, for you are God my savior. For you I wait all the day long. Remember no more the sins of my youth. Remember me according to your mercy, because of your goodness, Lord, Amen.*

The title of this painting, that is the title we normally use in English, is The Incredulity of Saint Thomas. This is one of my favorite pieces of art. It was the background on the desktop of the computer I used all throughout college. I would stare at it often. Sometimes I'd finish sending an email, or working on a paper. I'd

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close Microsoft Works and there it was, this painting, every time. I couldn't not see it. And over the years, I noticed certain details of this scene as imagined by Caravaggio, that led to some profound, spiritual reflections.

If you have only a basic familiarity with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as described in the Gospels, you know what's happening here. You can easily deduce who the characters are: Christ, Thomas, and two of the remaining ten apostles. But to really allow ourselves to enter into this picture, which paints way more than 1,000 words, as I am about to demonstrate. To really descend into the particulars, and see the profundity in the details, we need to consider two things.

First, the artist. And second, the scene he's depicting. Who was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio? I'm not equipped to give you a comprehensive biography of the man, but there are certainly some things worth knowing. Caravaggio was an Italian painter who worked in Rome, and parts of Italy and the Mediterranean in the late 1500s into the early 1600s. He quickly grew in notoriety and was highly sought after by patrons. In his personal life, he was a colorful character.

To put it mildly Caravaggio was a man of many vices. He had a penchant for getting into violent brawls. It seemed as though there were often multiple parties out to get him, so to speak. It is quite possible that he suffered mentally and physically from over exposure to the lead in his paint. If you dive into the details, Caravaggio's life seems to reflect his own artistic style: graphic realism with a strong personality, and a dramatic contrast of light and dark.

It's a style known as chiaroscuro, which is Italian for light dark. You can see the style of chiaroscuro on full display in this painting. Most of the light we see is shining on, and reflecting from the body of Christ. The background is shrouded in darkness and shadow. The setting isn't irrelevant here. It's just not the focus. It's not the point. What the characters are doing, the encounter they're having with each other. That's what matters here.

Caravaggio is very deliberate about what is revealed by the light he chooses to let in on this scene. And what is this scene? What is Caravaggio depicting here? For this, we turn to the Gospel of John, chapter four, verses 24 to 29. *"Thomas, called Didymus, one of the 12, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to 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 into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe'. Now, a week later, his disciples were again inside, and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst, and said, 'peace be with you'. Then he said to Thomas, 'put your finger*

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here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side. And do not be unbelieving, but believe'. Thomas answered and said to him, 'my Lord and my God'. Jesus said to him, 'have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed'".

Saint Thomas has, unfortunately, I would argue, unfairly, been given the nickname: "Doubting Thomas". But doubting refers to who he was at the beginning of this story, not at the end. Again, the title of this painting is The Incredulity of Saint Thomas. Incredulity is defined as the state of being unwilling or unable to believe something. And that's exactly what Thomas says at the beginning of this scene. Until I see, I will not believe. He begins unwilling, and we call him "Doubting Thomas", we remember where he began. But when we acknowledge him as Saint Thomas, we remember where he went: to the ends of the earth, proclaiming Christ as my Lord and my God.

Now that we know a bit about the artist and have reviewed the Gospel account, we have more context for this painting. But before we dive into the details, that I have noticed over the years, I want to invite you to take a minute or two, or however long you'd like to just sit with this image in silence to see if you notice anything in particular. If any of the details stick out to you. You don't have to, of course, but if you want to pause the video for a moment before I proceed, now is the time.

If my memory serves me correctly, it was sometime during the 2005-2006 academic year that I started seeing this painting in a whole new light. I remember sitting at my desk in my dorm room, staring at this image on my computer. I was taken with it, but I couldn't quite figure out why. And then I noticed a remarkable detail: Christ's hand. With his right hand, Christ has pulled and is holding open his garment. This is an invitation. Jesus knows that Thomas is incredulous. That Thomas is unwilling or unable to believe that Christ could possibly be either still alive or alive again after such a gruesome, violent death, and burial in a tomb sealed and guarded. He knows that Thomas needs to see in order to believe. So He's showing him. He opens his garment, reveals the wound in his side, and lets Thomas see.

Christ's right hand is extending an invitation, that the Thomas who doubts, might instead, have faith. Now I've shared brief talks and reflections on this painting and only in select, few settings and mostly with smaller crowds. But every time I do, I always ask the crowd, what is Thomas doing? The crowd always responds, he's putting his hand in Christ's side. To that, I always say, no, he isn't. Look again; where is Jesus's left hand? And slowly, but surely, I hear that excited wave of awe. And wonder and revelation pass through the crowd, as they notice the placement of

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Jesus's left hand. Christ has his hand firmly on Thomas's wrist, as though he's guiding Thomas's arm, pulling Thomas's hand into his side. Why did Caravaggio paint this detail into this scene? In John's account, Christ says to Thomas: "bring your hand and put it into my side".

Using the Gospel of John and the details imagined by Caravaggio, we can dive so deeply into the psychology of this encounter, and see ourselves reflected back. Look at it. Don't take your eyes off of it. Imagine that your friend has died, but he wasn't just your friend. You had given up your life and all your possessions to follow him. You walked with him everywhere. You ate when he ate, fasted when he fasted; you protected him from mobs that wanted him dead. You repeatedly saw him perform miracles. You were at his side when he healed the sick, the blind, and the lame. You clung to every word he said, and he didn't just die. He was stolen. Betrayed by your brother. Handed over by the guardians of your religion, violently tortured, nailed to a tree, buried in a borrowed grave that was sealed and placed under armed guard, and then, in the depths of the darkest hours of your life, the only friends you have left come to you, and tell you that he's alive. Do you believe it? Do you want to believe it? Do you want to let yourself believe it? You already gave up the world for your God and now it seems that even your God has been killed and taken away from you. Could you bear the thought of reclaiming that hope and that faith, only to have them violently stolen again?

So you choose not to believe the only friends you have left. You doubt, you're incredulous, because you're human. And then, all of a sudden, he's there. Your friend who died. He's in the same room as you. Although the doors were locked, he's standing in your midst. And with your heart and your mind still raging in turmoil, confusion, sadness, anger, and all the stages of grief that descended at once in chaos, he speaks of peace. Peace be with you. But it can't be. You came not to bring peace, but the sword, and you brought it. Is that not what you meant? And your friend looks at you and says, "bring your hand and put it into my side. And do not be unbelieving, but believe ". But you can't. You can't do it.

You left everything you had for everything you thought you wanted, and you lost it all. You said you'd believe again if only. He's offering you the if only. You can't take it. You can't, you can't, you can't. You can't do it. He pulls back his shirt, shows you where they cut him. But you can't. You can't do it. Bring your hand, he says, and put it into my side. But you can't. So he reaches for your hand. You let him take it. And he draws you to himself again. And you feel it: his body, his blood. Where they cut into him. And you have nothing left. You're out of arguments. My Lord and my God.

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I have no idea how intricately Caravaggio imagined himself in this scene, but the details that Caravaggio uses to depict this scene helped me to imagine all of that. It helped me to understand both Thomas's doubt, and Christ's mercy. Look at the eyes of the other two apostles. What are they looking at? Their eyes are fixed on the finger in the side. The looks painted onto their faces, to me, they display a sort of holy envy. Thomas, our brother, he gets to know what it feels like. It's as though the faith they already had is being strengthened and affirmed by witnessing their brother's unique encounter. Their eyes are fixed on the moment.

But where is Thomas looking? He's looking down and to the side. He's looking past Christ. He's letting Jesus guide his hand into his side, yes, but he's refusing to acknowledge the moment with his own eyes. It's as though Caravaggio captured as much of the potential realism of the moment before Thomas's confession of faith, my Lord and my God, by having Thomas refuse to acknowledge with his sense of sight, what he can no longer deny by his sense of touch. I wasn't looking, so I really don't know what I felt. It's as though Caravaggio painted one, last futile attempt at an argument onto Thomas's face. But Thomas's confession of faith is inevitable. And by the look on his face, he knows it.

These were the reflections I began having in my dorm room while sitting with this work of art, in considering its details. I have no idea if I'm right about how the actual scene played out or about what Caravaggio was thinking when he imagined and then painted these details, but being right isn't the point here. Works of art like this point to mystery, and when we contemplate the art, we inevitably move deeper into the mystery it points to. And the mystery that Caravaggio points to here is the person of Jesus Christ and how each of us encounters him uniquely in our own life and in our own way, in our own faith, and in our own doubt. And in contemplating this mystery, I have found the person of Saint Thomas to be a mirror unto myself.