

Worship in Action: Experience Required
John 20:19-29
April 28, 2019
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching



I want to invite you to find the white insert in your bulletin this morning with picture of a famous painting on it and allow that to be the focus of your attention while I talk for just a few minutes before we adjourn to our Worship in Action groups...

This painting, “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas,” is by an Italian Baroque painter who went by the name of Caravaggio, even though that was actually a place he lived and not his given name (his real name is Michelangelo Merisi). Out of some 60 extraordinary works, 23 of them remain in Rome today and last summer I had the opportunity of seeing most of them in addition to others in Florence. What’s unique about Caravaggio is that he brings his subject matter close up, he minimizes the background or setting in order to focus our attention on the point he finds most compelling, and he uses light to direct our eyes to what he wants us to see. As I read and thought about the scripture for this morning this painting came into focus; Thomas and two other disciples leaning in closely to inspect Jesus’ wounds. Jesus guides Thomas finger to actually

touch his scarred flesh as the others press forward. Thomas has to not only see, but *experience* this Risen Christ for himself.

And isn't that how it is? We need to experience things for ourselves in order to know they are true. I can *tell* you about a great restaurant I've found but its only after you've eaten there too that you can affirm my discovery. We can read about a tragedy but its only after we have endured something similar that we can begin to know the depth of another's suffering. We can watch on tv, look at video online, read about things in books and magazines but nothing compares to first-hand encounter; we need to *experience* something in order to claim intimacy and knowledge of it.

And that's the challenge of resurrection; I told you last week that in order to "live resurrection" we needed to experience it. That means we need to die to something: to our egos, our assumptions, our ignorance, our arrogance in order to come to life as something and someone new. We need to let go of something in order to gain something; we need to *experience* resurrection in this life in order to *live* resurrection in this life--in order to be like Jesus.

Thomas' actions confirm this; he needs to see it for himself in order to believe. Caravaggio suggests in the painting that while Thomas might be the only disciple with the guts to say that out loud, surely the others must have thought the same. Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas; in fact, the text says Jesus encourages him. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Experience me, Jesus invites. Touch me, talk with me, see me---it's real, *I'm* real. *This* is what resurrection looks like!

This morning as you move to your Worship in Action group, I want to challenge you to consider how it is each one of us can *experience* the realities of our partners and neighbors in our community, in hopes that we too might have a "resurrection experience". We have begun to

make interesting and exciting plans but let me caution you not to make them from a distance, but to get in close, like Caravaggio's Thomas—think about how you can put your finger in the wounds of this community; think about how you can press in to get a good look at *their* experience. Consider how we can touch and hear and see the ones who are struggling and succeeding all around us. Don't settle for taking anyone's word for it; how can *we* experience, first hand, what it means to live here? How can we experience resurrection unless, like Thomas, we first touch?

Let's not fall into the trap of thinking that we know anything more about our community than we did three months ago, because I don't think we do. Let's not think we know what's going on because someone told us. Let's figure out how to be like Thomas---let's assert our need to know first-hand. How can we show up to see? How can we reach out to touch? How can we put our fingers in the side of others *before* we make plans that we hope, pray, or assume will meet their needs or capture their interests or make a way?

We have three groups: Building Community, Extending Our Welcome, Community in Concert and you are invited to choose one. You can choose the one you went to last time or a different one or move from group to group. As we think about "building community" and have begun to invite others in, my challenge to you is to also consider where we can *go out* into the community and *experience* what's already there! As we think about "community in concert", I am wondering if we shouldn't find the music that's *already being made* in our community and *experience* it before we offer our own? As we work to "extend our welcome" perhaps we ought to place ourselves in the position of *being welcomed* somewhere else; we can learn from others how to offer the welcome we want to extend.

Let Caravaggio's Thomas speak to you: allow the distractions to fade into the background. Notice where the light is drawing your eye. Press closer to see what's happening. Reach out your hand to touch a wound. Being like Jesus means experiencing resurrection!