

Sermon for April 12, 2026
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: John 20:19-31, Psalm 16
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

In our life of faith, we rely on metaphor. Our language for God will always be imprecise, so we use countless images to name God — rock, eagle, mother, creator, potter. We examine the literary depth of miracle stories to find meaning that we can map onto our own lives. We extrapolate from a narrow collection of details to all kinds of situations that stretch the limits of what a story can do.

Well my friends, not today. Today we're talking about real bodies, real contact, real intimacy, real belonging. Real doubt. Real faith.

John gifts us a story of flesh and gore, of desperation and hope, of reunion and of mystery. We experience the events that follow the resurrection alongside the disciples and then alongside Thomas, a disciple who needed more proof — Thomas, who was not content with metaphor.

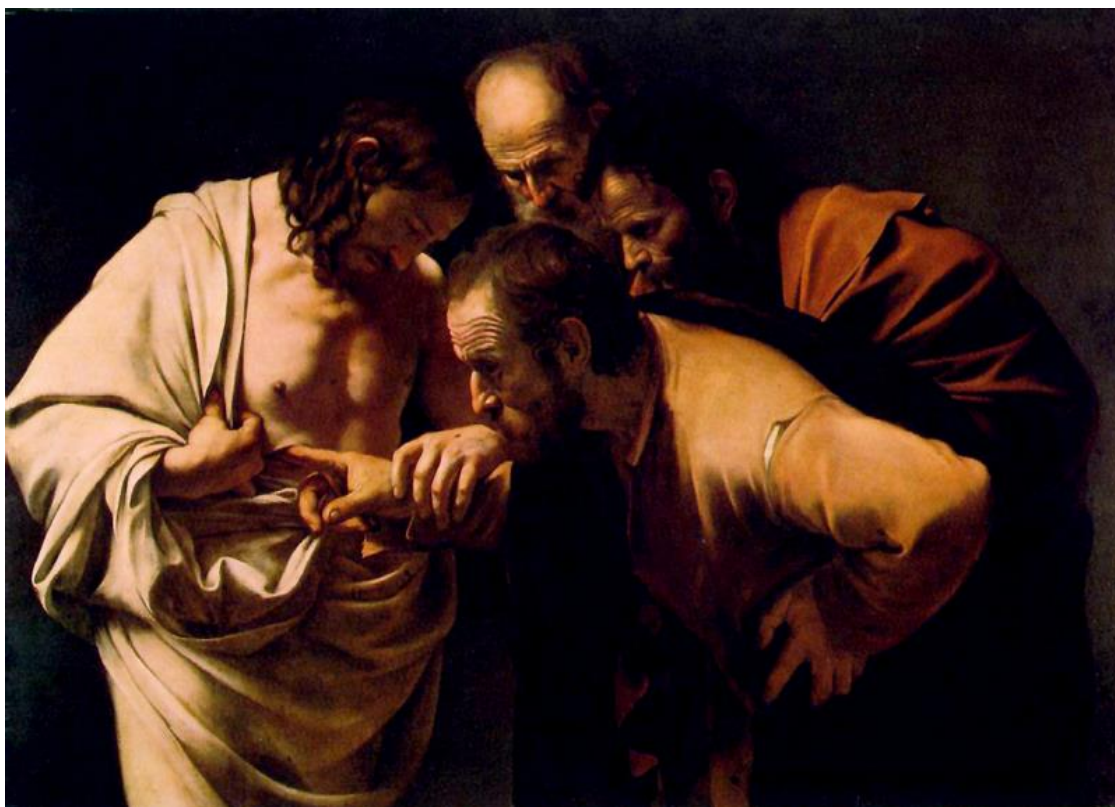
At first, Thomas is not there. The other disciples are gathered in a locked room, fearful of persecution. Jesus appears among them and before they have time to shout, he says “peace be with you.” This peace is not a liturgical recitation but rather a reminder of what is at the heart of the promises he has made them all along. It is his peace which belongs to them.

Then he shows them the wounds where humiliating instruments of state violence mutilated his hands. He shows them the gash in his side where he had been pierced with a spear after he died. And then the disciples rejoiced—for they saw him in his fulness. They saw his body changed, wounded, and scarred, and that's when they knew it was him. He breathes the breath of life upon them.

When Thomas turns up, his friends tell him the whole story – they tell him about the proof they experienced through seeing Jesus's body and feeling his breath. But Thomas is not satisfied with their account. He wants the viscera too.

He gets more than he bargained for when, a week later, the scene plays out again, slantwise. The disciples are gathered again behind closed doors, and Jesus appears in their midst and says “peace be with you.” Seemingly without prompting, Jesus offers Thomas more than his breath. He implores — “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Countless artists have captured this moment in freeze frame, but to me, Caravaggio’s “The Incredulity of St. Thomas” best evokes the grisliness and glory of the moment.



You can see the flesh around Jesus’s ribs give way for Thomas’s finger to enter. Thomas’s eyebrows, halfway up his forehead, reveal the depth of his shock and awe. In the horror, hope, and holiness of this intimate encounter, we are allowed to dwell with our own longing, the longing we may rarely admit, to touch Jesus and really *feel it*.

The moment falls away, the contact breaks, and Thomas greets Jesus: “My Lord and my God!”

Many Christians have held up this story as example number one of what not to do, sticking the disciple with the epithet “Doubting Thomas.” But Caravaggio seems to embrace Thomas in his skepticism-turned-jubilant, and I wish to do likewise. Thomas’s doubts and his hope mirror those of the other disciples — and perhaps our own. He was willing to believe that the thing he hoped for more than anything was true. He was desperate to experience the world transformed by Jesus Christ. Perhaps wanting it so much was why he couldn’t quite take his friends’ word for it — just as the male disciples did not quite trust the word of the women.

I find it deeply stirring that it is Jesus’s wounds that unveil the disciples from their unbelief. Perhaps materializing into locked rooms was small potatoes compared to the signs they had seen Jesus do in their years with him. But Jesus confronted them with his own particular, wounded body which they had seen on the cross, and it was so undeniable, so glorious, that it overrode their sense of the possible and gave them, finally, a glimpse of the new world that Jesus promised, and not only that but a world with their teacher, friend, and Lord still in it. The whole, real person of Jesus before them was enough to help them believe the rest of the truth.

I think John captures this story for us because he understands that good news is hard to hear in times when bad news is so loud. Perfect belief is not a requirement for being part of the story. It would be a blessing indeed to believe unceasingly without ever witnessing something that fortifies our faith, but I don’t know many people who can accomplish that.

We may not experience the literal wounds and flesh of the resurrected Jesus Christ. But we do experience our own bodies and interact with the bodies of others. We know what it is to be wounded and scarred. We know what it is to heal, to celebrate the joys and pleasures that are possible because of our bodies. Thomas’s moment of encounter invites us into deeper intimacy with one another and radical connectivity with our communities and with the world around us.

If trusting in the realness, the fleshiness, of Jesus's body changes the whole world, then so does embracing the embodied humanity of our neighbors and strangers and enemies. And yet we live in a culture that diminishes the body and privileges some bodies over others. Just as Jesus did, we live in a time when many bodies are disposable, exploited, and disappeared.

This week I held my breath as international news focused on a story about brutal and total disregard for the real humanity of others. The United States government threatened to annihilate Iran, to wipe out a civilization and, by extension, all of its people. That holding-my-breath feeling lodged deep in my chest as I contemplated the millions of human beings implicated by such a threat. Each of them possesses the same expanse of spirit as any one of us; each of them holds a whole universe of truth and possibility within their bodies.

Though that disaster did not unfold this week, I fear that such threats may dull our ability to witness and honor the humanity of those who are conveniently cast in the role of enemy. I pray that we instead hone our instinctive connectivity with all children of God so that we can enact in the world the peace that Christ promises us.

Another global event that captured my attention this week may offer us tools for that very honing by offering us an opportunity to lean into wonder and connection. Like many of you, I've watched raptly as a crew flew a ship called Integrity to the moon — and around it — for the first time in decades. The purpose of the Artemis II mission was to observe, to record, and to advance the work of astronauts and scientists.

From the far side of the moon, from the farthest point that humans have ever traveled, mission specialist Christina Koch offered a reflection and promise to her colleagues back home, and to all of us. She reported: "We will explore. We will build. We will build ships. We will visit again. We will construct science

outposts. We will drive rovers. We will do radio astronomy. We will found companies. We will bolster industry. We will inspire. But ultimately, we will always choose Earth. We will always choose each other."

What makes a mission like Artemis II it worth it is that it might enhance our common life, it might create possibilities for the flourishing of people that have never existed before, it might evoke our wonder and hopefulness and lead us back to each other. Looking to the stars, or seeing images of our home *from* the stars, might remind us how precious creation is, how special we are, and how wonderful it is that we are here at all. Four astronauts put their bodies on the line to go out there and remind us of that.

It isn't just amazing that we're here — it's important. It matters that we show up in our bodies, that we choose peace and each other. Just like it matters that we worship a resurrected savior who remained wounded, who remained fleshy. All this bodiness reveals for us a life of faith that allows us to hold our real questions and doubts together with our tangible hope and our action.

When Thomas and Jesus meet, we learn again about the intimacy and connectedness of community, the ways that each person in their particular body shows up, and the precious gift that it is to be with one another. This connection points us to our responsibility to one another in our bodies, in our whole lives. We are called to care for people, especially those who seem unlike us, so that all might flourish. When we love each other, we prove to one another that God lives. May it be so. Thanks be to God.