Easter 2A: John 20:19-31

One of my favorite paintings is one I discovered in an undergraduate renaissance art history class, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. In this painting the risen Christ doesn't just tell Thomas to put his hand in his side, rather with one hand Jesus opens his robe and with the other he guides Thomas' hand to the still open wound. Two other disciples look on in awe as Thomas' finger is thrust deep into the wound. As I questioned and deconstructed my faith during college *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* was something to which I could relate. Indeed doubt interwoven with faith continues to be a part of my journey. In the gospel text Jesus declares blessed "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," but who among us would not gladly choose the blessing of Thomas? Doubt. Incredulity. Suspicion. These are considered virtues in our age. It is how we often encounter texts—perhaps even this gospel lection?—and it is how we often encounter each other. Doubt. Incredulity. Suspicion.

After I came home from Afghanistan saturated in combat trauma I was as equally averse to therapy as my soldiers, but I returned to what I knew and that was reading and writing. I devoured books. One of the most important was Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery.* Before she outlines her therapeutic method she lays out what she calls the “forgotten history” of trauma. It is in this chapter that she links the *hysteria* of women to the psychological war trauma of men.

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1 Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601-1602, Sanssouci Palace, Postdam, Germany.

It was fascinating to learn that before Freud engaged in his now famous psychoanalysis grounded in a hermeneutic of suspicion, he actually believed the bourgeois women he analyzed and the stories of rape and incest they told him. It was only after his colleagues discredited him that he reconsidered the direction of his work. Of course, to believe these late 19th century continental women would have been tantamount to admitting to an epidemic of sexual violence and trauma.\(^3\)

Herman argues that the way war trauma was treated in the 20th century repeats the history of repression or disbelief with respect to the sexual trauma of women. During and just after each great conflict there were periods of renewed interest in hearing the stories of soldiers on their own terms. Eventually though, the voices of doubt and disinterest prevailed. I wonder about our own period of renewed interest. How sustained will such interest be when the cameras are shut off? It is all too easy for us to doubt. Whether it is human nature or the lens through which we look as children of modernity, we can't help but question and doubt, especially in the religious traditions that we represent. And yet the challenge of our gospel lesson is to believe.

In Afghanistan I ministered in the midst of very intense combat operations. I was there, in the fray, when many of my soldiers were wounded or killed. I held pressure on open wounds as I prayed on too many occasions. I carried or dragged my soldiers to what cover I could find. Of course, my actions in combat were not extraordinary. It was simply what I had trained to do, what we had all trained to do. I continue to marvel at the courage and compassion my soldiers had for one another in the midst of death and an overpowering sense of hopelessness. Even still, life and love prevailed in powerful ways. In the midst of war our wounds were as undeniable as the blood-stained hands that kept pressure on them. But coming home? Coming home, it is possible to bleed out from the open wounds in our souls. It is here that we may understand the

\(^3\) Ibid., 13-14.
urgency of Jesus' charge to us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

We have been called out and just as the Father sent his Son, we too are sent out. Like Thomas we are in a very blessed position. Our soldiers willingly show us the open wounds that remain long after they return from war. Often they all but grab our hands and thrust them in as they exclaim, “See! Put your finger here.” After so many others have doubted and dismissed them we are invited to believe. As we encounter texts—and to borrow a phrase well-worn in Clinical Pastoral Education, as we encounter the living human document, as we encounter each other, our gospel lesson invites us to disarm, to listen, and to pay attention to the one in whose presence we stand, to the One in whose presence we all stand. In short, we are invited to believe.

Like Freud and others it is all too easy to engage in a hermeneutics of suspicion. Doubt can protect us from dealing with our own pain and it can protect us from the attacks of others. Yet, Christ calls us to the vulnerability of a hermeneutic of belief, which is really a hermeneutic of love and forgiveness. I'll close with this quote from Hans Urs Von Balthasar's masterful work of poetic theology (or is it theological poetry?), Heart of the World. In this book Balthasar retells the gospel of John from the perspective of Christ sent into the world to be its heart. He writes,

But just as the earth rounds itself off into a ball, so, too, do the veins make a return to the Heart and love goes out and comes back eternally. Slowly you will master the rhythm, and you will no longer grow fearful when the Heart drives you out into emptiness and death, for then you will know that that is the shortest route to be admitted again into the fullness of delight. And when it pushes you away from itself, then you should know that this is your mission: being sent away from the Son, you yourself repeat the way of the Son, away from the Father, and out to the world. And your way to remote places, where the Father is not, is the way of God himself, who goes out from himself, abandons himself, lets himself fall, leaves himself in the lurch. But this going out of the Son is also the going out of

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the Spirit from the Father and the Son, and the Spirit is the return of the Son to the Father.  

To minster to soldiers is to be sent out to remote places, to dark places, to painful places, (often very literally or even in the comfort of our offices) as Balthasar says, where the Father is not. The open wounds in our lesson remind us that the risen Christ is the crucified Christ and the crucified Christ is the risen Christ. When our soldiers descend into hell, when we descend into hell, the good news is that Christ is already there waiting to meet us. Amen.

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5 Ibid., 213-214.