

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“When Words are Not Enough”**

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*“Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe’” (John 20:24-25).*

It was the picture that caught my eye in the newspaper last week, a picture of Pope Francis wearing a fashionable white full-length puffer coat. Maybe you’ve seen it; apparently it was a viral moment that many found entertaining. But the implications are serious. Pope Francis has never worn a white puffer coat; it was a picture created by artificial intelligence. As you’ve all heard, AI is getting more sophisticated. Even those who specialize in studying the authenticity of photographs are finding it more difficult to distinguish the genuine from the fake. The article went on to say that soon AI will be able to get images to do pretty much whatever we’d like them to do. We’ll be able to do the same with videos. And with a recording of your voice, AI can be used to record your voice saying something you’ve never said, nor would say.

Can you imagine the implications? The article talked about an impending misinformation wave in which fake photos, videos and recordings will have people guessing what is truth and what is bogus, what is real and what is fake? Imagine the confusion: images generated by AI will look so real, while on the other hand, those things that are so real will reject as fake.

It seems in the future, for our own protection, we’ll need to be more skeptical and discriminating and doubtful, less gullible, and naïve and trusting. We’ll need to be more like Thomas when it comes to doubting the sensational news, and more like a child when it comes to trusting God’s unchangeable Word of Truth.

In the Gospel lesson we find the disciples in hiding behind locked doors. They fear the enemies of Jesus might now turn their attention on his immediate followers. You know what happens. The locked doors are no more a barrier to Jesus than the stone in front of his tomb. “Jesus came and stood among them.” How, we do not know. But we do know this is not necessarily good news to disciples. The last time He saw them they had all pretty much failed Him in spectacular fashion, betraying Him, denying Him, abandoning Him, forgetting His instruction, His Word. They know Jesus has the right to be angry, and if He lashes out it would be the end of them.

Instead of cursing them, however, Jesus says “Peace be with you”. It’s a beautiful absolution, in short form. He’s forgiving them . . . for everything: for their abandonment, doubt, denial, and unbelief. He’s also restoring them as His disciples and has plans for them. “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

The trouble, of course, is Thomas wasn’t there! Maybe he was out buying food or something. When he returns, the disciples barrage him with the news. “We have seen the Lord!” But words aren’t enough for Thomas anymore. He’s not going to let himself be duped again. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” It’s a brazen statement. Only God can read the heart, but on face value, Thomas’ words indicate genuine, Grade A unbelief. Before he believes anything, he’s going to need tangible evidence. He’s going to need visible proof. But that’s not faith anymore, is it? That’s something different.

Unfortunately, that’s where many are today. Words are not enough anymore, not even the Word of God. They’ll believe it when they see it. That’s the attitude that’ll make artificial intelligence so dangerous, because it will feed people what they *want* to believe, whether using photos or news articles or videos. But Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.”

Eight days later, Jesus returns to the disciples. He gives Thomas eight days to think about himself and his brash unbelief. He gives the other disciples eight days to practice their witnessing skills on a cold, hard unbeliever. Jesus appears before the disciples. This time Thomas is there. Again, those first words from Jesus will be important. Jesus has the right to be incensed with Thomas. But again, His first words are: “Peace be with you.” And then, “Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe.”

If you would, have another look at the front cover of your bulletin. It's a painting from Caravaggio entitled "The Incredulity of St. Thomas". It's not a very flattering portrayal of Thomas. That was his way. When Caravaggio painted a fruit bowl, he painted apples badly bruised and inflicted with worm holes, and the grapes that were wilted and washed of their color. (You probably wouldn't want him doing a portrait of you.) In any case, look how closely Thomas is studying the wound caused by the plunge of the spear. (Any closer and he'd be sniffing at it.) Look at his brow as he opens his eyes wide to let in the light. Notice Thomas's left hand on his hip, the body language of doubt and skepticism. It's as if he's saying, "Just a minute now, let me have a look at this. Is this real or fake . . . a minor flesh wound or intended to be the coup de grace?" Look how invasive the finger of Thomas is as it explores the gash with ungloved hand. (Every medical person in here is squirming.) And look how Jesus, with His hand, is pushing the finger in deeper.

The other two disciples in the painting are also leaning in, aren't they, studying the wounds. They stand in for you and me, who are not so strident as Thomas in demanding visual confirmation, but we do have our moments, don't we? Moments of doubt and disbelief. Moments when we yearn to live by sight rather than by faith. If you were in that room, wouldn't you also have looked over Thomas' shoulders, hoping to study the evidence? Perhaps you would have even thrown open the curtains to allow in the light of the sun. Who of us wouldn't welcome a little more observable, empirical, measurable evidence?

Jesus calls that sin. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees say, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." They were asking for some compelling miracle to confirm His messianic claims. Jesus does not cooperate. He says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign." What does that say of us, who are always hungry for a little more proof, a little more dusty archaeological evidence that confirms what the Scriptures have long said?

Remember, the devil too demanded a sign. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "Show me the observable, the empirical, the measurable!" Jesus doesn't cooperate. He sends Satan back to the Bible. "It is written, man does not live by bread alone." The Nicene Creed does that too. "On the third day He rose again *according to the Scriptures*." That is, if the Scriptures said it, it's enough. We should not need more.

In any case, only after a thorough examination does Thomas finally concede: "My Lord and my God." That's the central confession of the Christian faith: "Jesus is Lord". But is Jesus happy to hear it? He says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." In other words, Thomas is simply conceding what he can no longer deny. It reminds me of the Last Day, when "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus is Lord", some in faith as they have been doing all their lives; others, not by faith but as a concession they would rather not make. For them, it's too late for saving faith. They're just acknowledging what is plain for all to see.

Like Thomas, you and I struggle with doubt. And Jesus has the right to be incensed with us. What more could He have done for His vineyard than he already has done for it. But as Jesus said "Peace be with you" to His disciples then, He says it to us: "Peace be with you!" He scolds Thomas and scolds us too for our doubts, but He does not reject us or abandon us. "Peace be with you!" "Look at my hands. Put your finger here." In other words, he's not just pointing out evidence of resurrection. He's reminding all that He went to the cross for Thomas, and for you and me. He has redeemed us all by His blood on the cross.

In fact, if you look at the painting again, the four heads *compose* a sort of cross, don't they? That's Good News for Thomas, and Good News for us. We live our lives under the cross, even within the cross. We are not outside of the faith just because we struggle with doubt. We are still disciples, still members of the body of Christ, people for whom he died and rose.

Jesus says to them and us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." In other words, blessed are those for whom the testimony of God's Word *is* sufficient. That's us. You and me. We are not here because we have seen and studied the holes in the hands of Jesus. We are here because the Holy Spirit has enkindled faith in us through His Word, for "no one can say Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit."

Moreover, we will not get to heaven because we always managed to ward off the doubts and have a pure and right faith. We'll get to heaven because Jesus has nail prints in his hands and feet. Jesus still bears the marks of His crucifixion. That is, you'll never meet a God that does not have nail prints in his hands. You'll never meet a God who cannot show you where the spear went up into his side. You'll never meet a God who has not died on a cross for the forgiveness of your sins, including the sins of doubt and skepticism. You will never meet a God who is not at peace with you . . . because of those marks in His hands and feet.

When He returns, look for the marks. By them you will know He is the One. He is your Savior from sin and death. He still bears the visual evidence of His redeeming love for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.