The Word Made Flesh: Sensory Experience and the Doubting Thomas in Italian Renaissance Art

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The story of St. Thomas's incredulity is told in only one canonical source—the Gospel of John (20:24). Having missed Christ's first appearance to the disciples after the Resurrection, Thomas demands evidence of his miraculous rebirth. When Christ appears and offers him the opportunity to touch his wounds, Thomas declares Christ his "Lord and God." Repeated in sermons and religious tracts, these words resonated as the final proof of Christ's divinity. Our colloquial understanding of Thomas's disbelief as it is conveyed in the expression "don't be a Doubting Thomas" has too frequently eclipsed the saint's importance and the theme's relevance for early modern believers. This anachronistic understanding of the episode has biased interpretations of the Doubting Thomas in art and has obscured what these images may reveal about the epistemology of the senses in the Renaissance. Contemporary textual sources, mostly sermons, which have not been discussed with regard to this iconography, suggest that it was Thomas's touch that mattered most to his story of disbelief.[1] This paper will consider three very different examples of Renaissance Doubting Thomas imagery spanning nearly three centuries. Despite their discrepant milieus, these paintings promoted the power of touch as a means of finding truth, justice, and, ultimately, faith.

Depictions of Thomas's incredulity frequently appeared in Psalters, Books of Hours, and cycles of the *Vita Christi* beginning in the 1250s. On early Christian sarcophagi and in medieval illuminated manuscripts, representations of the Doubting Thomas were placed in their narrative sequence of events following Christ's Resurrection.[2] During the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the Doubting Thomas came to be explicitly linked to the theme of justice and the acquisition of evidence. Indeed, Thomas's indelicate inquiry and his desire for empirical evidence find analogies in the modern system of criminal law. Christ's generous acquittal of Thomas may also be likened to the medieval juror—at once a member of the civic law system and servant of God's law. This civic Thomas tradition should be traced to a now-lost fresco that stood over the doorway to the Sala dell'Udienza in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, until around 1475.[3]

In the Sala dell'Udienza a painting of Thomas was accompanied by an inscription authored by poet and politician Franco Sacchetti (1332-1400). Sacchetti's inscription below the fresco embodies the civic appropriation of the Doubting Thomas iconography. The poem reads:

> Touch the Truth as I do, and you will believe
> in the absolute Justice of the Trinity
> which always exalts each person who sits in
> judgment.
>
> Direct your hand to the Truth and your eyes
> to heaven;
> and all your speech and your every deed
> to the common good without exception.
>
> Search for the Truth, Justice will result;
> Direct your whole and free mind to the
> Common good,
> Because without this, a government is deficient.[4]

The research for this paper comes from my Ph.D. dissertation "The Pursuit of Truth and the Doubting Thomas in the Art of Early Modern Italy," under the advisement of Dr. Catherine Puglisi at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. I am greatly indebted to both Dr. Puglisi and Dr. Glenn W. Most for their insight on all things "Thomas."

[1] That touch, or empirical investigation, was the lynchpin of Thomas's faith in many ways reflects early modern movements in empirical science and skeptical philosophy. For the most recent work on how these trends engaged with the arts, see David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), with extensive bibliography.

[2] The earliest known depiction of the Doubting Thomas is a relief on the tomb of St. Celso (late 4th-early 5th C. Milan, S. Maria presso S. Celso).

[3] Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio 1298-1532: Government, Architecture, and Imagery in the Civic Palace of the Florentine Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 50-52. Although other scholars have briefly noted a "judicial" or "civic" tradition for Doubting Thomas imagery (see note five below), none have cited Sacchetti as the source for this "tradition." For a more thorough discussion of the originality of Sacchetti's verses and the fresco it accompanied, see my doctoral dissertation, "The Pursuit of Truth and the Doubting Thomas in the Art of Early Modern Italy" (Rutgers University, 2009), specifically chapter 3, "*Toccate il vero*: Evidence, Justice, and the Doubting Thomas."

[4] Andrew Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 62. In Italian the sonnet reads:

The first verse engages the viewer in a sensory experience of the fresco. As viewers read the sonnet, their eyes would have been directed to the fresco as they, like Thomas, sought to "touch the truth." Presumably such a viewer would also be in a position to "sit in judgment." Sacchetti goes on to suggest that in directing "your" hand, which has now taken the place of Thomas's, toward the truth revealed by Christ, a sense of common good motivates these actions. Finally, the author exalts the search for truth as inherently linked to justice and the good of the Commune. Upon reading this final stanza, the viewer-reader now directs his attention to the good of a just government—a conclusion which seems far removed from the depiction of John 20:24 above the poem. Sacchetti's verses were likely a unique interpretation of the biblical story to that point. Nowhere else had such a judicial reading of Thomas's disbelief come into play.[5]

Despite the renewed interest in ancient philosophy and skepticism during the Renaissance, humanists generally subscribed to Fideism—"the position that faith alone provides the way to truth and that philosophical activity is to no avail."[6] As a poet, novelist, and politician, Sacchetti was ahead of his time. He suggests that Thomas's act, represented in the fresco above his sonnet, is one that facilitates knowledge. Sacchetti aligns Thomas with one who "touches the truth" and "believes in Justice."[7] It is this maxim that must inform a slightly later fresco of the Doubting Thomas in the town hall of the Tuscan town of Scarperia (*c.*1400, Figure 1).

In a semi-exposed portico of the Palazzo Pretorio, the *Doubting Thomas* is in remarkably good condition. Christ and Thomas stand alone, framed by a Gothic crenulated arch. Because Christ stands on a crude stone block, he appears taller than Thomas; he has lifted his arm above his head in order to facilitate Thomas's outstretched hand. Their fingers painted with extreme delicacy, Christ peels back his robe to allow Thomas's forefinger entry into his wound. Standing on a pedestal at the right of the simple composition, Christ assumes the position of an orator in the Palazzo Pretorio. Unlike other images of the Incredulity, in which Thomas kneels or stoops in order to signify his supplication, Christ is elevated by a physical object.[8] The plinth calls attention to Christ's authority as arbiter of religious justice—if Thomas sought evidence with his inquiry, Christ's allowance of this request surely signifies his divine sentence. This was the balance Renaissance jurors were expected to uphold in their own decisions. By isolating Christ and Thomas from the narrative context of the story, the artist emphasized the moral message at the heart of Sacchetti's sonnet: truth and clemency are the result of careful investigation.

Sacchetti's inscription was obviously influential since later representations of the subject, such as the fresco by Pier Francesco Fiorentino (1447-1497, Figure 2) in the town hall of Certaldo, quoted directly from the original Florentine poem. Andrea del Verrocchio's sculpture for Orsanmichele (1467-83), commissioned by the highest court of commercial law in Florence, must also have been informed by with these earlier precedents. The message of justice and truth-seeking embodied by frescos of the Doubting Thomas in communal palaces afford insight into how sensory experience was understood outside of a strictly religious setting. At the same time these very images, made for more secular, civic purposes, may have inspired changing devotional ideals.

A particularly compelling sermon by the Dominican friar Savonarola (1425-98) proposes that Thomas's contact with Christ was of crucial importance for the verification of faith. Dated to *c.*1497, the sermon titled *Della celsitudine del Verbo di Dio per il senso il toccare* relates the importance of touch for finding religious clarity.[9] Savonarola indicates that those who "have a more noble sense of touch also have a more noble intellect, because those who are 'hard' are inept. Just as St. Thomas…we do not believe lightheartedly…but touching and handling him [Christ] several times, seeing and investigating his life and his works…we know that we were not made by chance, but with great consideration from God, from He who touches strongly and arranges gently

Toccate il vero com'io, e crederete/ nella soma Iustizia in tre persone,/ che sempre essalta ognun che fa ragione./ La mano al vero e gli occhi al sommo cielo,/ la lingua intera ed ogni vostro effetto/raguardi al ben commune sanza diffetto./Cercate il vero iustizia conseguendo;/ al ben commune la mente intera e franca,/perch'ogni regno sanza questo manca.

5 Although I cannot claim to know of every sermon or exegetical tract to mention John 20:24, those that I have found do not call upon such an interpretation. Those scholars who have cited this "civic" tradition of the Doubting Thomas (among them Butterfield, Maria Monica Donato, Glenn W. Most, John Paleotti, Lucia Battaglia Ricci, Nicolai Rubinstein, and Edna Carter Southard) have provided no additional primary evidence for a "tradition" of this judicial interpretation. That none has surfaced and the subsequent endurance of Sacchetti's verses suggests Sacchetti as the primary innovator in this tradition.

6 C. B. Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times," in *Reappraisals in Renaissance Thought*, ed. C. Webster (London: Variorum Reprints, 1989), 229.

7 Butterfield, *Andrea del Verrocchio,* 62.

8 A mosaic in San Marco, Venice, alternately, uses both the stoop of Thomas and the placement of Christ on the landing of a set of steps to signify the height difference between the two figures. Later, Luca Signorelli and Cima cast Thomas in a sort of stoop—not kneeling and not standing erect.

9 Savonarola, *Prediche di Fra Girolamo Savonarola de'predicatori* (Florence: A. Parenti, 1845), 27-32. This sermon was included in a collection of sermons published first in Latin in 1536 and later in Italian (1547). For the most recent discussion of Savonarola and Florence, see Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) with earlier bibliography; special thanks to Kathleen La Penta for her helpful notes on the translation of this sermon. Although Savonarola emphasizes Thomas's handling of Christ's body, Glenn W. Most has pointed out that the biblical account never describes Thomas's touch. The early exegesis on this subject largely favors the interpretation in which Thomas probes Christ's wound; if Thomas did not *actually* touch Christ, however, that was not the version of events recorded by artists. In the overwhelming majority of these images—painted or carved—Thomas does make physical contact with Christ's wounds.

everything from end to end." Like Sacchetti, Savonarola seems to have cast off the more negative interpretation of Thomas's sensory inquiry. Savonarola urges worshippers to identify with Thomas and, to quote Sacchetti, "touch the truth as I do." Savonarola's sermon may have contributed to the particular meaning of Doubting Thomas imagery in the communal palace setting, facilitating a connection between the "handling" of Christ and the "handling" of evidence. The anonymous frescoes of the Doubting Thomas in Scarperia and Florence, along with later versions like that by Verrocchio, may have in turn shaped contemporary attitudes about the senses. For Thomas, touch facilitated truth and in the civic arena this truth governed the higher, spiritual goals of the Commune.

Representations of the Incredulity like those just discussed created a powerful paradox between the subject itself—Thomas's disbelief—and the potential of these works to inspire faith. Thomas's gesture called attention to Christ's wounds, "commonly interpreted as the wellspring of grace, the source of the sacraments that redeem mankind."[10] Christ's salvivic role was thus emphasized by Doubting Thomas, whose belief was solidified by contact with the lord's divine body. Renaissance altarpieces of the Incredulity, such as that by the Venetian painter Cima da Conegliano (1459-1517/18), indicate that Thomas's handling of Christ's body was an important model not just for Renaissance jurors, but for the laity as well.

Cima painted the *Doubting Thomas* (*c.*1502-04, Figure 3) for the altar of a lay confraternity in San Francesco, Portogruaro—a small town in the Veneto. The work is now in London, in the National Gallery. Here the gospel narrative is set within " shut doors" as dictated by the text (John 20:26): Christ stands in a room defined by the orthogonals of the ceiling and red and white checked floor, which implies a closed space. Christ appears to be unharmed by the Crucifixion: his skin is a milky white and his body is perfectly muscled. Cima's Thomas probes the wound of an otherwise unscathed Christ, reminding viewers that the savior's sacrifice led to his resurrection and to human redemption. The painting was destined for the altar of a confraternity whose charitable contributions aided the sick and whose members were flagellants (*battuti*). Although many flagellant confraternities had by this date given up their physical mortification, the members' dedication to the reminder of Christ's bodily sacrifice meant that his triumphant return was especially important to the group's piety. Given the concerns of its viewers, whether they were invalids or confraternity members, Cima's painting must have recalled late-medieval devotion to Christ's body and wounds.[11]

Franciscan theologians were particularly eager to evoke Christ's wound as a passage to salvation. St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Order, realized the climactic moment of his spiritual life when he received Christ's stigmata in a divine vision. Verification of Francis's wounds, like those of Christ, was central to both Franciscan hagiography and imagery. Celano, Bonaventure, and others all cited Thomas's tactile inquiry as fundamental proof of the Resurrection and thus of the importance of the wounds for early Christian and Franciscan devotees alike.[12] Cima's altarpiece in the church of San Francesco exemplifies the Franciscan appropriation of the Doubting Thomas. The Order's adoption of the theme reasserted the redemptive power of Christ's wounds, an association that would have been of particular interest to the commissioning confraternity, whose purpose was to aid sick pilgrims returning from the Holy Land.[13] Moreover, Franciscan worshippers familiar with John of Caulibus's fourteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ* were encouraged to insert themselves into the narrative of Christ's life: for these viewers, Thomas's sensory exploration of Christ's body verified *their own* faith, admonished *their own* disbelief.[14]

Thomas's actions were central to the affirmation of his faith, and by extension to the faith of all Christians. In the later years of the sixteenth century these very actions were the subject of Protestant ridicule. Christ's response to Thomas's declaration of him as "Lord and God" was firm but generous: "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). John Calvin went so far as to declare that the "stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous."[15] This is not how Catholic Reformers understood Thomas's incredulity. Carlo Borromeo (1538-84), perhaps the most important bishop of the Counter-Reformation, urged the faithful to use their senses, just as Thomas did, to imagine Christ's suffering. In a homily on the Passion of Jesus delivered in Milan Cathedral, March 23, 1584, Borromeo instructed the faithful to use their senses to imagine Christ's wounds:

10 Vladimir Gurewich, "Observations on the Iconography of the Wound in Christ's Side, with Special Reference to its Position," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957): 358-362.

11 Cima's London *Incredulity* and his slightly later version of the same theme (in the Accademia, Venice) are the subject of my forthcoming article, "From Vocation to Veneration: Form and Function in Cima's Two *Doubting Thomas* Altarpieces," *Arte Veneta* 69 (2009).

12 For a discussion of Thomas's relevance to the Franciscan Order see my dissertation, chapter 2, "The Doubting Thomas and Franciscan Renewal in the Early Renaissance."

13 For documentation on the foundation and function of the Scuola di San Tommaso, see Giuseppe Leonardi, "Profilo Storico dell'Ospedale di Portogruaro sulla Scorta dei Documenti Esistenti dall'Epoca della sua Fondazione nell'Anno 1203," in *Atti del Primo Congresso Europeo di Storia Ospitaliera* (Reggio Emilia: Centro Italiano di Storia Ospitaliera, 1960), 676-695.

14 See John of Caulibus, *The Meditations on the Life of Christ*, eds. Francis X. Taney, Anne Miller, and C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Asheville, N.C.: Pegasus Press, 2000).

15 Ellen Spolsky, "Is Touching Believing? What Did Doubting Thomas Want to Know?" *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 2 (1994): 111-129.

> Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side [John 20:27]. This is the invitation which the Lord is still addressing to us today, for his desire is that we enter into his wounds and that we read in them what is written inside them….*Put your hand* into these wounds and you will understand all the value of your soul….*Put* your hand *into this side*, and you will understand how much God is horrified by the excesses of the flesh, by cupidity, vanity, pride, impurities….*Put your hand into this side* and you will recognize how beautiful virtue is.[16]

Touch was often considered the basest sense, the sense most closely associated with lust and sex, but Borromeo proposes that touch *purifies* these carnal indiscretions. For Borromeo the Word is made Flesh precisely through tactile contact. The potency of Borromeo's rhetoric may find its closest visual corollary in the *Doubting Thomas* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610).

Caravaggio's painting presented a novel formulation of the subject in *c.*1602 (Figure 4) and, as the most frequently copied of his works, indelibly influenced future representations of the theme. Caravaggio's stylistic and iconographic innovations were without precedent: it is the first *Doubting Thomas* to depict the subject with three-quarter length figures and to move Thomas to the right side of the composition. In so doing, Caravaggio's Thomas must extend his arm in front of Christ in order to reach the laceration. The viewer's eye is drawn from Christ's side, to the apostles, to Thomas's gesture—completing a visual circle around the composition. The placement of the apostles to Christ's left extracts the figures from their usual narrative roles. Previous illustrations of this biblical scene portray a narrative that is meant to be read from left to right, beginning with the apostles and St. Thomas, and ending with Christ's gesture of generosity. Instead, Caravaggio requires his viewers to become interlocutors, rather than readers of this picture. The viewer stands where another apostle might have stood, had this been a sculptural group or a theatrical set, rather than a two-dimensional painting. Caravaggio's depiction of the wound and Thomas's probing finger is particularly explicit: Thomas inserts a finger deep inside the cut, unlike earlier Italian versions of the subject (like that by Cima, Figure 3) in which this contact is less invasive.

Caravaggio's compositional choices reflect the very type of experiential faith encouraged by Borromeo. Under the employ of two important Roman cardinals during the time when the *Doubting Thomas* was painted, Caravaggio could not have been unaware of contemporary attitudes toward Thomas embodied in Borromeo's sermon. Borromeo's demand that we reenact Thomas's deed is a particularly Catholic reading of the Incredulity theme. The issue of Justification, of central importance to the Council of Trent, polarized the differences between the established Church and Luther's camp. Protestants argue that salvation is based on faith alone, while Catholic theologians contend that faith must be paired with good works. Widely disseminated publications like Bishop Alfonso Paleotti's discourse on the Holy Shroud (1599) reiterated Thomas's crucial role as verifier of the sacred wounds—the very wounds transposed to the Shroud.[17] Caravaggio's painting, with its call for viewer participation, mirrors the edicts of Paleotti and Borromeo: Thomas's actions, like our own, are essential for salvation.

The experiential spirituality embraced by the Franciscans in texts such as the *Meditations* and by Reformers in sermons like Borromeo's also finds a corollary in Renaissance theories about the senses. Aristotle had named touch the "indispensable sense, synonymous with life itself," going so far as to make it the "paradigm and structure of the intellect."[18] If "thought and perception are analogous, as Aristotle claims, then we know the world around us because the mind is able through touch to *grasp* the form of things."[19] Later philosopher-theologians like Francis Bacon and Thomas Aquinas agreed that sensation was the foundation of cognition, and, later still, Leonardo da Vinci wrote that "the sense of touch clothes all the skin of man."[20] Bonaventure, Savonarola, Borromeo, and Paleotti, whose work is highlighted here, all suggest that touch was not just the "foundation of cognition," but was an important component of religious experience: touching is a route to religious healing and a "dialectic between materiality and resurrection, between physical and spiritual."[21]

Images of the Doubting Thomas, such as the lost fresco in Florence, the Cima altarpiece now in London, or Caravaggio's iconic representation of the theme, make a viable case for the importance of Thomas's tactile inquiry as

[16] Glenn W. Most published this sermon in his book on the exegetical history of the Doubting Thomas. See Most, *Doubting Thomas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[17] Alfonso Paleotti's text (*Esplicatione del Sacro lenzuolo ove fu involto il Signore et delle piaghe in esso impress ecol suo pretioso Sangue*) was published first in 1598 and reprinted in 1599, both with dedications to Clement VIII (Bologna, 1599, press of Gio Orossi with Licenza de Superiori; Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome 10.4.c.17). Paleotti refers repeatedly to Thomas throughout the *Esplicatione*; like St. Thomas, writes Paleotti, the holy Sindone (Shroud) confirms Christ's wounds and their miraculous quality. Paleotti was archbishop of Bologna from 1597 to 1610.

[18] For the best and most recent discussion of Aristotle in relationship to the sense of touch see Elizabeth Harvey, *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 5.

[19] Ibid., 4-5.

[20] Leonardo da Vinci, as translated by Kenneth Keele, "Leonardo da Vinci's Physiology of the Senses," in *Leonardo's Legacy: An International Symposium,* ed. C.D. O'Malley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 36.

[21] Harvey, *Sensible Flesh,* 2.

a source of spiritual truth. It was perhaps for this very reason that Caravaggio's painting became his most copied work, his *Incredulity* the most influential to other artists including Rubens and Rembrandt. The desire to avoid "seeming gullible" or of being deluded by our initial insights has meant that Thomas's incredulity seems more and more appropriate—at least in retrospect. Caravaggio's visceral naturalism was perfectly cued to the subject of the painting itself; together, style and meaning converged to depict our natural inclination to want to believe that our eyes, and hands, can provide us with trustworthy evidence of the world beyond ourselves.

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Figure 1. Anonymous, *Doubting Thomas*, late 14th-century, fresco, Palazzo Pretorio, Scarperia. Author's photo.

Figure 2. Pier Francesco Fiorentino, *Doubting Thomas with St. Jerome*, 1490, fresco, Palazzo Pretorio, Certaldo. Author's photo.

Figure 3. Cima da Conegliano, *Doubting Thomas*, 1502-04, oil on panel, 294 x 199.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, London. Photograph © The National Gallery of Art, London.

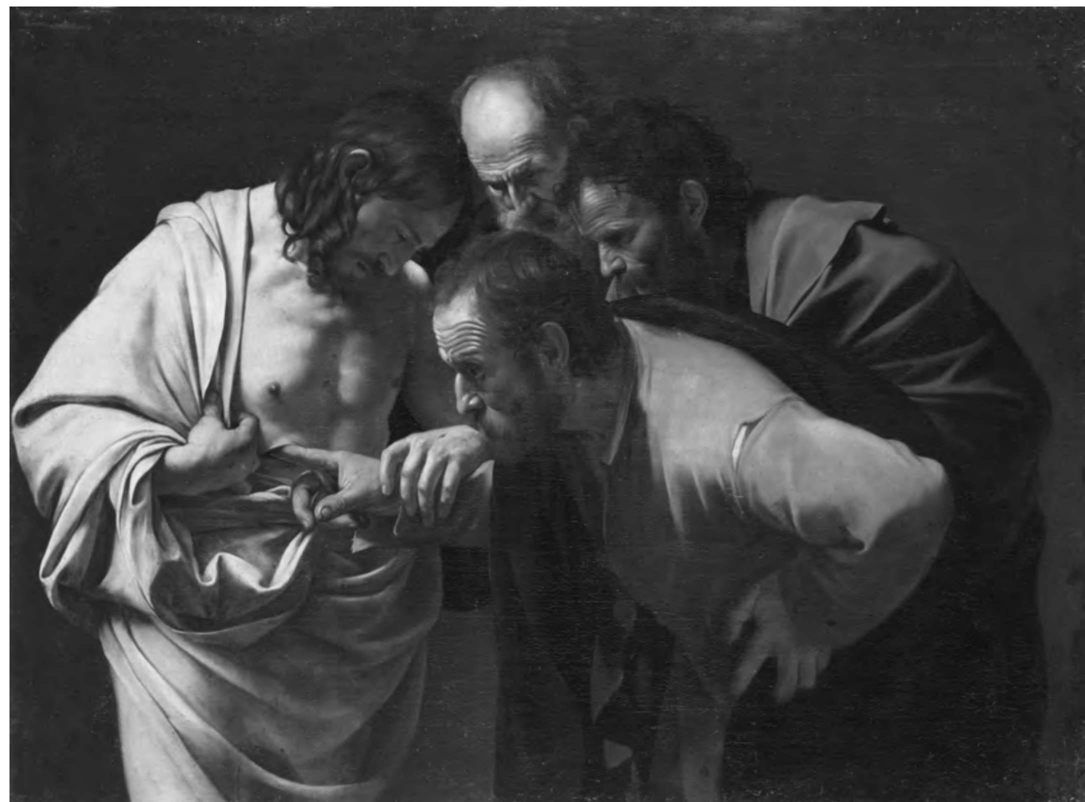

Figure 4. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Doubting Thomas*, c.1502, oil on canvas, 107 x 146 cm, Stiftung Schlösser und Gärten, Sanssouci, Potsdam, Photograph © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.