*“Trusting the Testimony: Remembering the Truth”*Based on John 20:19-31 and 1 Peter 1:3-9
Delivered on Sunday, April 19, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

I think the standard view of the gospel reading today is to see Thomas as the ultimate doubter. But if we are honest about what we see in the gospels, we know he is not alone and there is doubt throughout the ranks of Jesus’s disciples in the Easter story.

The women said first that Jesus had risen, but Peter and John had to investigate for themselves. They did not trust the women’s testimony. Then Peter and John also said Jesus had risen, but even after, they and all the other disciples were all still hiding in fear. It was as if they all didn’t even trust their own testimonies.

What makes Thomas different is the degree to which he seeks certainty, and then how he seems to show a jealousy from having been left out. You see, Jesus settles the doubts of all but Thomas first. Then they all eagerly tell Thomas, but he doesn’t trust this unanimous testimony. He doesn’t believe any of them. Thomas now has the testimony of all of his friends, but he demands something more. He doesn’t even just want to see Jesus as they had seen Him. Thomas wants to see Jesus and he wants to probe Jesus’ wounds with his fingers. It’s almost as if he is saying to his friends, not only do I not believe you, but if you believe what you saw, you were fooled – you are naïve.

It does kind of look like Thomas thinks he’s smarter than the others. It doesn’t matter what all of them say they saw, he’s the only arbiter of truth he trusts. This is something that the Gnostics and the Manicheans, two heretical groups in the early church, picked up on, and they chose to use Thomas, to reveal ‘secret truths’ that all the orthodox Christians had missed out on. They said Thomas had a certainty about what was revealed to him, that other Christians either never had, or they forgot.

I believe we all have a tendency to be like Thomas in our faith and in all aspects of our lives. Like Thomas, I think we crave certainty and often lack trust in anyone but ourselves. We start off in many cases trusting the testimony of others, but after a while, if what we see or hear makes us uncomfortable, we begin to dispute it. We don’t want to feel like we don’t know something or that someone else is smarter than us. I don’t think this kind of skepticism is doubt, but it is actually a rejection of doubt. We don’t want anything to challenge what we think we know for certain.

But doubt is good, in that doubt makes our faith stronger because we confirm our beliefs. When we doubt, it is our faith, a gift from God, seeking an understanding in our minds. Doubt is what makes us seek out why we believe something and refine our belief. Doubt is what keeps us humble to know, it is possible we could be wrong about something. Doubt drives us to seek input from others to verify what we know and to seek God to know more. As Peter says, testing our faith reveals its value, and that value is worth much more than gold.

No, the greatest risk to our faith is what Thomas is seeking – Certainty. When we come to believe and proclaim a certainty in our beliefs, we are essentially lifting them high so that doubt cannot reach them. We raise them up so that doubt cannot make them stronger or give them substance. In these scenarios, we fail to build up the understanding we need, to withstand hardship and our stumbles. We lose faith, or others lose it because of us, when something rocks our world.

The churches to which Peter was writing, were in one of those moments. We can tell from the letter, that he is writing to a second generation of believers, those who are blessed, as John wrote, because they believe but have not seen. Yes, they are blessed by God, with a gift of faith to believe in Jesus, to love Jesus, and to know Him in mystery – fully God and fully human. But these early believers are facing trials – persecution and Peter says that in these trials they can celebrate, because the end result of their faith is life.

We are also in one of those trials right now, all of us – not just Christians – but all of humanity. In the midst of this global pandemic, we are all seeking some kind of return to normalcy. It is common for those of us who have not been sick, to feel burdened right now. We have a collective cabin fever, to get things back the way they were.

We trusted social distancing for a moment, but now we want out. We want to believe that everything will go back to the way it was before the pandemic, but the longer we stay in this isolation, the harder it is to see a return to normal. The longer we see economic decline, the harder it is to see a return to normal. The longer we see COVID numbers rise, even as we are doing all we can, and the longer we see family and friends hanging on by a thread, and the longer we go without being in each other’s presence, the harder it is to comprehend that normal will return.

I have seen a great deal of panic this past week, from Christians and non-Christians. Despite the deaths of 19 friends, family and co-workers – loved ones – in Atlantic County, and about 40,000 loved ones killed in our country, and 160,000 people worldwide, there is a growing sentiment to dismiss these lives and discount these losses. It seems the world is already trying to give us a false sense of peace, one that says that everything must go back to normal, to how it was.

On all sides of every ideological spectrum in government, business, society and entertainment, there will be and already is a massive effort – not necessarily by some sinister plot – but by our human nature to seek a return to some kind of stability that we already know and is comfortable. That’s where the I think the impulse to discount these deaths comes from, and where the conspiracy theories and hoaxes find fertile soil. If we can say it never was as bad as it seemed, or maybe even that it never really happened at all, or if we find someone to blame and punish, then maybe normal isn’t out of reach.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I am feeling this cabin fever too, and I miss our old normal. I long for us to be here in this sanctuary, face to face, shaking hands and giving hugs. I’m a hugger. I miss hugs. I want to see people back to work, be able to shop, eat out and go to the beach. However, I think we can and must learn from the disciples in their doubt, because the only certainty they had was that everything changed. Their only question was whether the change was good, or bad.

As the disciples hid in fear, as they were trying to make sense of the Resurrection reports. Then Jesus enters the room with a greeting of peace – ‘Peace be with you,’ He said. In that moment, the apostles were likely feeling anything but peace. But peace is what Jesus had promised them just a few nights earlier, when He told them that His peace was His gift to them, and that the peace He offers is not the peace the world gives. No, the peace that Jesus promised was an assurance, the confidence that He had overcome the world, that He had conquered sin and death, and that they had nothing to fear.

This is not the false peace that the world offers us. It was not like the kind of peace that Rome provided through fear and intimidation, using the military and crucifixion to maintain order. No, the peace of Jesus is not the kind of peace the Judean leaders kept by appeasing the empire. Jesus’s peace is not the kind of peace that the world will offer us now, by trying to help us to forget the tragedy we are living in right now and pushing us to forget the lessons we should be learning.

The peace of Jesus is the good news of the Kingdom of God present with us and yet to come. It is our awareness that the God who created all things seen and unseen, entered into our humanity, to humbly submit to our weaknesses and our limits, to reveal for us the fullness of who God is and the depth of God’s love. It is by His life, and His death on the cross, and His resurrection, that sin has been defeated and we have been redeemed. Death has been destroyed, empowering us to turn away from the false comfort of our sins, because by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we have been cleansed, and the Holy Spirit, our true comfort, can live in and among us, empowering us once more to love God with all that we have, and love our neighbor as ourselves, revealing the Kingdom of God.

This peace reminds us our aim is not to preserve and protect ourselves and our comforts, either by trying to earn God’s favor or by ignoring God’s will all together. No, this peace calls us to put the needs of God and others before our own desires, especially for those who do not yet know the love of God in the good news.

This is the peace that allows us to doubt, without fear, as we seek understanding, because as Paul says, this is the same peace that surpasses all understanding. This is the peace that allows us to admit we can learn from others. It is the peace that allows us to admit our mistakes and turn toward God. It is a peace that allows us to accept the changes in our life, without having to deny the things that have changed. The peace of Christ allows us to let go of certainty to live by the assurance of things hoped for, and by our confidence in what we have not seen. This is what it is to have faith.

I know it is hard right now, but we cannot lose our faith, hope and love in these trying times. I pray that we will not have any more tragedy close to home for us as a church, and that when this is over, we all choose to remember this moment, to remember the lives lost, and count every loved one who is gone, whether we knew them personally or not, by praying for their families—those mourning a real and true loss. I pray we remember those who had to put off medical care, or who received medical care, but were separated from loved ones, because of the virus.

I pray that we remember our feelings of isolation and seek to comfort those who are alone. I pray that we remember what it feels like to be confined and pray for the imprisoned. I pray that we remember what it feels like to go without, and we look for new ways address poverty in our communities and meet needs of those who always go without. I pray that those of us who could work from home, remember how important every grocery and convenience store clerk, every health care team and every other ‘essential’ worker has been to us all in this time.

I pray we remember how hard it was to be apart and cherish our time together. I pray we remember these truths and let them be our testimony – a testimony to our trusting in the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, a testimony of our faith in the love our God showed by living, dying and rising again for us. Amen.