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Balancing Trust and Proof

One of the strange things about being a human in 2026 is how little most of us actually understand so many things that are part of our everyday lives. We may be able to use them and we know they work because the medicine helps or the search engine finds what we are looking for or because the car drives when we push the gas down. But most of us couldn't explain the how of it all - the math or science behind a lot of our daily activities. We trust the mathematicians or the scientists to have done their job right. But no one has ever seen an atom and most of us don't really understand $E=MC^2$ and even then, when we can't see that it works, we trust that other people have done the work and have the proof, even if we don't understand it. A lot of our lives, far more than just math and science related things, are based on trust. We trust other people to tell us the truth. It has to work this way. We have to operate on some amount of trust because we can't test and prove everything ourselves, both because we don't have the knowledge to do so and because it would be exhausting.

But, sometimes trust isn't enough, because as it turns out, science gets disproved all the time. Scientists find new information that changes what they thought before, not because they were lying before but because they found new information. You know: Eggs were bad for us, now they are good; Pluto was a planet, until it wasn't; for a long time the earth was flat and only a few hundred years old. Even our most reliable forms of proof turn out to be provisional. Which means doubt isn't a flaw in the system — it's how the system corrects itself. And if that's how we live in everyday life—trying to find the balance between trust and proof.

Humans have always lived with this tension — trusting what we can't fully verify, revising what we thought we knew. That's not a modern problem. That's a human problem. But, it is a problem which feels especially hard these days when, after decades of declining trust in leaders and institutions, we now have AI and social media causing total havoc with our ability to know who we can trust or where we can turn to find authentic proof.

Part of this is we know that every source has a bias. So, now, instead of turning to our local newspaper or Walter Cronkite on the one evening news, in order to trust something we might want to look at multiple sources with different biases and try to pull out the thread of what we can trust. Or, sometimes we feel we can

only trust a direct source. For example, when there was so much chaos in Minneapolis earlier this year, I found it easier to trust the people I know who live there and were organizing in their neighborhoods than many of the other sources reporting. Often, the question isn't whether to trust, but how do we trust wisely?

And it turns out our faith tradition has been sitting with exactly this question for a very long time. What does our faith say about the balance between trust and proof?

Most of us started our faith journey trusting that our parents or other people in our lives were telling us something true about the world when they told us about God. For most of us, we trusted those people and we felt something ourselves that seemed true. We believed there was more to the world than what we could see and touch. We trusted that feeling of there being something greater and maybe we were inspired by stories in the bible. But, along our faith journey, most of us also have come to a place where we wanted some kind of proof.

Which is just what happened to Thomas in our bible story today. As a disciple Thomas had already seen some unbelievable stuff. He'd seen plenty of miracles. He had felt drawn to Jesus enough to leave his life and follow him around for several years. He had heard Jesus teach. And the other disciples who told Thomas they saw Jesus were people he'd been through some stuff with, people he trusted. But, what they are telling him changes everything and he wanted some proof. Really, he just wanted what the others already got – to see Jesus with his own eyes. And Jesus gave him that. Notice what Jesus did not say. He didn't say, "Thomas, you should have believed." He didn't say, "You missed your chance." He came back. For Thomas. And he said, "Come closer."

Jesus did tell Thomas that those who believe on faith alone are blessed, but Jesus didn't refuse to give Thomas proof and Thomas did come to believe. And Thomas wasn't the only one who Jesus did this for. The scripture says that Jesus performed other signs for the disciples as well. Jesus met them where they were and helped them to understand what had happened, so they could go and share the good news with others. Which is exactly what they did – not that they had every question answered, but that with Jesus' help and in the community of other followers they understood and believed more than they did before. Jesus didn't shun their questions, he leaned into them.

I think Jesus understood the message behind one of my favorite quotes by Frederick Buechner who said: "doubt is the ants in the pants of our faith." In other, less fun, words that means that without our doubts and questions, our faith

can become stagnant and dull and shallow — doubt and questions are what stir us up; get us itching for more; get us to move to new places in our spiritual lives.

Too often, though, churches and people of faith have been so worried about questions and doubts that they have told people they were being sacrilegious by asking them. That they should just trust. And yes, trust is good. These stories have been passed down by generations of people who found meaning and importance in them for life. We can trust them.

But maybe you are here today with a Thomas moment of your own. Something you were told to believe that you're just not sure about anymore. Something you've prayed about and the silence felt deafening. Something terrible happened and you thought — where was God in that? You are in good company. The disciples themselves, the people who walked and ate and traveled with Jesus, needed more than they had before they could go tell the story.

Because, it is ok — more than ok, it is *good* — for us to question and be honest about our doubts. Being able to ask our questions and express our doubts is how we learn to trust each other and to trust God. We may not always get neat and tidy answers; we may not always resolve every question or doubt; but, by engaging with it, something better will happen than if we had not.

Because we have seen what happens when the church shuts down people's questions and doubts. It never leads to a deeper faith. When our doubts get shut down one of two things happen: either we end up with a brittle certainty - the kind that stops asking questions because it thinks it already has all the answers. The kind that stops listening. The kind that gets defensive when questions come. The kind that feels strong—but is actually quite fragile. That kind of faith can't grow because it won't move. This becomes a blind trust and its own fundamentalism.

The other side of the spectrum of when people aren't allowed to address their doubts is they end up with no faith at all – a decision that if they can't believe everything then they won't believe anything – if there is no proof then there can be no trust. This becomes a chronic skeptic who trusts nothing they can't prove and is again, its own kind of fundamentalism. Both of these are a kind of death to life and faith – a freezing in place that causes a rigidity which rarely serves people well.

Allowing ourselves to question and doubt is the third way then. But, it is worth noting that our motivation and intentions matter because there are different ways

to express ones' doubt. There's a kind of doubt that is lined with skepticism and says, "Nothing will convince me." This kind of doubt is not really interested in moving past itself. This might especially happen when our doubt is masking some kind of fear where if we find a resolution to our doubt we may need to make difficult changes in our life. Maybe resolving your doubt would mean having to change a relationship. I know there are many of you here today who used to belong to other religious traditions and the hard work of expressing your doubts and working through them eventually meant you felt you had to leave the faith community where you had been raised and the comfort of those traditions and people. That's really hard to face. So, sometimes our doubts are working to protect us, which is understandable, but ultimately not what will help us grow and deepen in our faith.

Instead, we want to use Thomas as a good model for how to express doubt. Thomas' doubt says, "Help me see." Thomas wasn't shutting the door—he was standing at it, asking it to be opened. He was expressing his doubt openly and honestly and trusting that something would come of it. That's faith doing its work.

Part of how that work gets done is in community. Thomas wasn't doubting alone in a room somewhere. He was with the other disciples — people he'd been through things with, people he trusted, even when he wasn't sure what to believe. Because faith isn't meant to be something we hold alone. Sometimes when you can't believe, you trust the person next to you to hold onto faith for you—until you can find your way back to it.

The church, at its best, is that kind of place. A place where you can bring your hardest questions and someone will sit with you in them, rather than hand you easy answers or tell you to stop asking. That's one of the reasons I love when we say prayers in unison or sing together, because some days I can pray the prayers and sing the songs with gusto and some days I can barely whisper them and some days I want to close my mouth in protest, but whatever I bring, there are enough of us that together the prayer is prayed and the song is sung. Showing up in the room and being honest about our questions and doubts is how we find the balance between trust and proof and deepen our faith together.

What the story of Thomas reminds us is that Jesus didn't wait for Thomas to figure it out on his own. He came back. He walked through the door. He showed up in the room where Thomas was. And he said, come closer.

That is still how this works. Jesus shows up — often in each other. In the person sitting next to you who is holding onto faith on the days you can't find yours. In the question someone else is brave enough to ask out loud that turns out to be

your question too. In the community that keeps showing up even when it doesn't have all the answers, because it has learned that showing up is itself a kind of answer.

We started today with the observation that almost all of life runs on trust. We trust the engineers and the scientists and the doctors, not because we can verify everything they tell us, but because we have enough evidence, and enough experience, and enough community around us to make trust the reasonable choice. And we hold that trust loosely enough to revise it when new information comes. That's not weakness. That's wisdom.

Faith works the same way. Not blind trust that refuses to look. Not chronic skepticism that refuses to be moved. But a trust that has been tested by honest questions, that has sat with real doubt, that has been carried by other people on the days we couldn't carry it ourselves — and has come through that process deeper and more alive than it was before.

So here is what I want you to leave with today. You do not have to have this resolved. You do not have to have arrived at certainty before you are welcome here. You do not have to pretend that you believe more than you do, or feel more than you feel, or understand more than you understand.

What Thomas shows us is that the door is still open. That Jesus meets us not at the finish line of our doubt but right in the middle of it. That the invitation is not "come back when you've figured it out." The invitation is simply: come closer. As we work to discern how to trust wisely, may we trust that much. Amen.