**11th April 2021**

**Call to worship**

We come from a world confused about truth.
We come with our own uncertainties.
Let us bring the darkness of human understanding
into the presence of God, who is light.
Let us bring the story of our search for truth
and share in fellowship the things we have heard and seen and touched.

**A prayer of approach**

We come in more sombre mood today;
the excitement of Easter past, we return to normal life.
But for Jesus’ followers, after that first Easter,
life would never be the same again.
Their new life with the risen Lord was just beginning.
Let us stir ourselves to remember that we are children of the
resurrection, and we approach our Lord with senses alert
to the new life and lessons he has to share with us today. **Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Lord, you accept our doubts and embrace our questions
like a wise parent encouraging your children to express themselves;
hiding your hurt at our scepticism,
always hoping for the best and seeing our potential.
We worship and adore you for believing in us. **Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

We confess that we are so often judgemental of others.
In particular, we berate those who do not share our beliefs.
What need have they of proof? Why can’t they just believe?
Yet we live in a world where little is taken at face value.
Fake news surrounds us, and the camera definitely does lie.
Therefore, Lord, forgive us when we look down upon the unbelievers, the doubters, the ones who demand proof;
for this is the world in which we live,
and the world to which we must proclaim your truth.

There is no proof we can offer in these times,
except to show our belief in the ways in which we reach out,
by accepting and loving unconditionally,
by showing patience and forbearance to those who differ from us – or is it we who differ from them?
Therefore, forgive us when we fail to reflect your truths in our daily lives, and let us become testaments to your risen power.
May Christ be evident in us and in all that we do. **Amen.**

Lord, we thank you for your patience with us,
your acceptance of our doubting and questioning,
and your assurance of forgiveness.
How many times do we grieve your heart with our lack of belief,
and exasperate you with our lack of faith?
But like a good parent, you gather us to you,
and answer our misgivings.
With you, Lord, there is infinite forgiveness. **Amen.**

**John 20.19-31**

**Sermon**

The death of Prince Philip on Friday, like any other death, raises questions of what life is all about and is there anything beyond death? We have just celebrated Easter where the church proclaims the resurrection of Christ as the promise of God’s hope for us all beyond the grave. But after the joy and triumph of Easter last weekend the lectionary reading for today is the story of Thomas, doubting Thomas who defiantly and courageously speaks out against his fellow disciples and says basically: ‘resurrection – what a load of nonsense. I don’t believe it! I wont’ believe it until I actually see it with my own eyes!

The story of ‘doubting Thomas’ is often seen as a negative one – the disciple who wouldn’t believe without seeing the risen Jesus – and yet he is someone who just wanted to see the evidence for himself. It would have been easy for Thomas to go along with his friends who had already seen Jesus, but Thomas wanted to experience it for himself in order to believe. The meeting with Jesus provides him with the chance to test the truth for himself.

In the age of social media and fake news, what helps us to believe in something? Is it knowing where it comes from, personal experience, physical evidence?

This week we explore how we come to believe and how doubt is vital in that process.

Two events this week show the effects of doubts and questioning.

Recent [statements regarding blood clots as a possible side-effect of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine](https://www.forbes.com/sites/roberthart/2021/04/07/uk-watchdog-u-turns-on-astrazeneca-says-under-30s-should-take-alternative-covid-19-vaccine/) against Covid-19 have varied between those cautiously derived from scientific research, to others couched in hysterical terms and offering no evidence for their assertions. The UK’s Medical Regulator the MHRA said about four people in a million would normally be expected to develop this particular kind of blood clot - though the fact they are so rare makes the usual rate hard to estimate. They conclude that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh the risks of the virus - hospitalization and death - for the vast majority of people.

Also, this week physicists say they have found possible signs of a fifth fundamental force of nature.All of the forces we experience every day can be reduced to just four categories: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong force and the weak force.

From sticking a magnet on a fridge door to throwing a ball into a basketball hoop, the forces of physics are at play in every moment of our lives.

Now physicists say there is strong evidence for the existence of an undiscovered sub-atomic particle or new force called a muon.

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, co-presenter of the BBC's Sky at Night programme, told BBC News: "It is quite mind boggling. It has the potential to turn physics on its head. We have a number of mysteries that remain unsolved. And this could give us the key answers to solve these mysteries."

Results and findings that shake your view of the world and cause you to doubt old ways of thinking and certainties challenge you to reform your opinions.

Academics often call those mental maps paradigms, and when a paradigm fails and we need to seek a new one, we go through a paradigm shift. That intellectual language might make it sound like we’re dealing with a strictly theoretical problem but people experience the failure of a mental map, paradigm or worldview as personally traumatizing. Even scientists when their conceptual maps fail them and they must challenge some of their fundamental scientific assumptions, use emotionally charged language to describe the experience.

Albert Einstein when he described the experience of coping with data that took him off the edge of his scientific map in discovering quantum mechanics said ‘it was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere, upon which one could have built’[[1]](#endnote-1)

Doubters can go various stages of doubt, a bit like the stages of grief.

There is denial: everything is fine I’ll just ignore those doubts.

There is anger; It’s your fault I’m having these doubts!

There is depression I’ve lost my belief I’m doomed

There is bargaining: maybe if I do this or do that the doubts will go away

Then there is acceptance. OK the doubts are here. What am I going to do about them?

We usually think of doubts afflicting the religious – doubting your faith. But it can be equally true for those who don’t believe in God, doubting their atheism, or their agnosticism.

The European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, also known as the Age of Reason, saw the results of scientific enquiry drive out many of the unfounded beliefs that had dominated most Europeans’ thinking since before the Middle Ages, and often frightened them into observing all sorts of strange rites and rituals from their convictions that these would ward off evil spirits or promote good harvests.

Although observant people recognized that the implementation of scientific innovations often led to serious social issues – for example, the Luddites, or pollution from coal burning – it wasn’t really until the Second World War, and especially the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that science began to be perceived as also presenting serious risks, even to the survival of the human race, first from the Bomb and more recently from climate change. Artificial intelligence will be another challenge for the future. There is a constant process of change and revision and reform.

Our church is called the Reformed church, due to the Reformation and the revision of the Christian faith in the 16th century and the impact of that on faith and understanding of the church. One of the tenets of the Reformation was the freedom to read the Bible for yourself and come to your own faith, unmediated by others, especially the priesthood. You were free to believe. In our church we have a diversity of belief and views. Sometimes that tricky to hold unity with such a diversity of belief. But I also believe its enriching and helps you work out your faith for yourself. What do you believe? And why do you believe it?

Some churches will tell you what you should believe and if you deviate from such beliefs, you are no longer welcome. In the United Reformed Church, there are essentials to believe to belong to the church, but those essentials are the core Christian beliefs, that God is trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit and Jesus is Lord. Even then people will have different understandings of what the trinity is and how Jesus is Lord.

The Bible is important to us as a source of those original beliefs. But again people in our church will have divergent views on how they see the Bible – from a totally divine and inerrant book, to a very human and flawed book and some where in the middle.

The Gospel writers did their best to convey the Apostles’ encounters with the risen Christ, portraying Jesus sometimes as recognizable and sometimes as unrecognizable, as able to eat with them and also able to pass through closed doors. These paradoxes convey the impression that Jesus’ body was not merely resuscitated but transformed in ways they could barely describe. Similarly, the presence of the risen Christ evoked both joy and fear in different witnesses and at different times.

I often think that St Thomas’ skepticism is actually rather healthy; it was a superstitious era, and he seems to have been less susceptible to hearsay than many others might have been.

Remember that all the disciples were huddled together out of fear. The emotion of fear undoubtedly plays a vital role in individual survival, not least in the ‘fight or flight’ reflex that occurs when we find ourselves confronted by an aggressor, but it can also paralyze us or lead to panic and is unlikely anyway to aid rational thought. [[2]](#endnote-2)

We are rightly afraid of catching the Covid-19 virus and/or of passing it on to others, but it is better calmly to take the recommended precautions than to flail around in a panic. We think of those scientists working in laboratories, fear of the virus cannot be allowed to interfere with the calm pursuit of their work; and frontline medical staff have continued to provide the best care for patients despite the risks to their own health.

Fear can sometimes paralyze not only our bodies, but our minds too.

If this account reveals the experience of the earliest disciples, it also reflects the struggles of John the gospel writer’s audience: a community of believers in Jesus whose relationships with their local synagogue are proving painful (see John 16.1-4;  cf 9.22; 12.42). Here truth is being contested. Some – maybe most – in the synagogue consider any claim that Jesus reveals God’s truth as disqualified by his shameful crucifixion. A story that starts with the evidence of a woman is, to them, hardly robust enough to rescind their conclusions.[[3]](#endnote-3) Due to the sexism of the day a woman’s evidence was largely deemed to be unreliable in the courts of law at that time.

The truth told by Jesus’ followers is tested by such hostility. How does it prove its integrity? Thomas’ experience suggests that believers aren’t so gullible as to accept it without question. He is often nicknamed ‘doubting Thomas’ as if he were in two minds. But the story suggests that he wants to test what he is told. What starts with Mary Magdalene’s startling announcement (v.18) is amplified by the others in their report to the absentee Thomas (v.25). To his credit, he is not so naive as to go with the majority. He wants to know for himself that he really can trust what the rest now believe.

Thomas comes to that moment through a process of testing that holds together the experiences of his friends, his own honest uncertainties, the chance to discuss these with them, and his willingness to reconsider his initial conclusions in the light of fresh experience. Thomas is convinced; in the end he has no need to touch. But the story as a whole suggests that testing the truth of Jesus involves something more. In the fierce heat of hostility, it has to prove its power to reconcile and renew: Peace be with you – forgive one another says Jesus (vv.21-23). Here inner convictions are matched by relationships that ring true to the ‘greater love’ of Jesus (John 15.12-13), which is never more obviously displayed than in the wounds he continues to carry.

 Faith is always tested. Does it ring true? Can you see it lived out in people’s experiences? Which is why all these personal testimonies we have had in our services are so powerful. And you talk it through with other. Will you go along with the crowd or will you think for yourself?

I remember growing up as a teenager and none of my friends went to church nor believed in God. I know that is the state of play for most teenagers in our society. But I was curious and read and discussed and also observed – looked at the lives of Christians I did know and sensed they had something – something that was attractive.

Believing the resurrection was a challenge and I can well understand why some people can’t believe it and I wouldn’t berate anyone for not believing it. The church minister I talked with as a questioning 16 year old said that although it was amazing and unbelievable – yet it seemed to be the best explanation for why the church started and still existed. I still hang on to that. Despite my doubts.

‘I doubt it’. ‘Such a dubious character’. ‘It’s doubtful’. So often we make doubt seem so negative. But it needn’t be. When I doubt my test results, I discuss them with my doctor. When I doubt the safety of some electrical equipment, I have it checked. Doubt is essential when something really matters. Doubt is not taking for granted what I’m told or assume or believe. It is Thomas doubting what the other disciples said about seeing Jesus alive. It mattered so much that he needed to know for himself. If Easter faith really matters, doubt is essential.[[4]](#endnote-4)

How do we test what is true? The phone caller says ‘I am from your bank. I need your account details to transfer the interest from your ISA.’ The headline claims an exclusive: ‘local MP says hospital should close’. With so much fraudulent activity and fake news, how do we test what is true? Truth isn’t always obvious, even when there’s no intention to deceive or scaremonger. Truth is never one person’s claim. I could ring the bank for myself. I might email my MP. Truth is tested by questions, conversations, doubts. As it was by the first followers of Jesus, when one of them made the most astonishing claim and another wasn’t so sure.

May God sanctify your doubts and use them to lead you to greater truth

**Blessing**
Father, your Son Jesus did not reject Thomas. Help us to value questions and questioners, and not to reject either when they are awkward; to discern what kind of evidence is appropriate and trustworthy in different situations; and to have the courage ourselves to be questioners and seekers of truth. **Amen.**

1. PA Schlipp, Albert Einstein Philosopher- Scientist, North western Uni Press 1949, p45 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Robert Beard is a freelance writer and Church of England priest* *https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-2/the-week-in-focus* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-2/bible-notes [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-2/explore-and-respond [↑](#endnote-ref-4)