

**“Trust” a sermon based on John 20:19-31 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the second Sunday of Easter, 24 April 2022.**

In the gospel reading today, an earth-shattering event is brought close to home. Even the risen presence of Jesus must engage very human responses. The story-teller doesn't want us to live in a bubble of pretending or an insulated capsule of belief. In no time, questions are asked. Doubts are expressed. Distrust emerges. Here are questions we might ask, doubts we might have, trust issues with which we grapple. So the resurrection of Jesus quickly becomes personal and close - locked doors, feelings of fear, the need to be reassured of peace, the desire for restored relationships, the need for truth to be embodied: “Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails, I will not trust ... “

A confession - this morning I have amended a Bible reading. At Knox we normally use the New Revised Standard Version which is regarded as an accurate scholarly translation of the Bible. I have changed the word “believe” to the word “trust” – which is an acceptable change according to reputable scholars. So today Jesus says to Thomas “Do not be distrusting but trusting.” And later “Are you trusting because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to trust.” And later “But these are written that you may come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through trusting you may have life in his name.”

The Greek word for believe includes the element of trust. But these days believe is often limited to intellectual assent. “I believe some things because they are rationally true.” Our limiting of the meaning of believe downplays its significance. You will know the exchange Alice has with the Queen in Alice in Wonderland. “Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'”

Trust, on the other hand, certainly involves the element of reason, but also includes my feelings. Trust is more relational. So we often associate believing with “heads” and trusting with “hearts”. Trust means relying on, depending on, leaning towards, putting our weight behind something.

Years ago there was a visiting preacher at the church I belonged to. One Sunday while preaching, he leaned forward on the reading desk in the pulpit, not realising that it swivelled forward. So as he leaned forward, the desk swivelled forward and he lost his balance for a moment. He recovered quickly and said “never put your trust in material things”. Putting your weight on it. Trust.

What difference does trust make? Using an image from our reading, trust opens doors. Distrust locks doors. Distrust locks church doors. In recent weeks there has been substantial criticism of a couple of large churches for abusing trust. In one there appears to have been misconduct. In another interns were expected to work long hours unpaid. So the leaders of Hillsong and Arise have stood aside related to issues of trust.

Many people are afraid that churches will use them to build up their own kingdoms. People are afraid of being manipulated or brainwashed or used or exploited or abused. They are afraid of being shamed or judged. And these fears often arise from having had those experiences. And not just trust of the church, but trust inside the church. Distrust spreads fast and it’s hard to overcome. A word here, a word there – the fire is lit, the sparks fly. And it is true in ourselves – an experience of betrayal, of manipulation, of abuse is enough to plant distrust in us so that it becomes part of who we are, part of how we respond to events around us. The Dunedin study shows how distrust seems stronger among people who have felt excluded by systems and structures they need to rely on to be part of our society. In recent months we’ve seen distrust of parliament and politicians, of local body authorities, of media, of medicine, of science.

There is an organisational principle called “design for trust” about the practices that organisations need in order to build trust. The principle features strongly in less formal bodies like Airbnb and Uber. The founder of Airbnb says that “designing for trust” is the critical factor in getting people to open doors.

In the passage we read, and in the gospel generally, Jesus’ main concern is to get the disciples out the door, opened from the inside. They had shut themselves away so Jesus enters the room, comes alongside them. The disciples shut themselves away because they were afraid the authorities would punish them. They stay hidden, because going out is too much of a risk. They trust each other enough to stay in the room together, but they don’t trust

enough to risk venturing out. So Jesus aims to liberate them from the fear that traps them.

Risk and trust go hand-in-hand. Jesus needs them to take risks so great that they need a strong reservoir of trust in each other and in God to be able to take those risks. And remarkably that is what happens. They learn to trust, they take a risk, they leave the room, and from those steps being repeated millions of times over the generations, the Christian movement spread and keeps spreading.

So how can trust grow?

Jesus appears to the disciples as a wounded speaker of peace. He enters the house with a body that bears the scars of crucifixion. Bearing scars and vulnerable, he greets them "Peace be with you." That vulnerability, that absolute transparency, invites their cooperation. And to strengthen them in stepping out, he shares his own spirit, his own breath. As we have seen so often with him, he does not rely on the traditional power structures of the time. Nor does he use coercion or manipulation. He doesn't expect instant assent. He builds trust by trusting. He builds respect by respecting.

Years ago, the then minister of East Taieri told me a story. He was helping someone recently released from prison. The man was working around the church. The minister was going to be away for a few hours. He gave the man his keys. The man asked what he was doing. Some people might want to get into the church or into the hall, so I'm giving you the keys so you can let them in. The man said, people have not given me keys for a long time. Locked doors.

We see trust in Jesus' interaction with Thomas. He honours Thomas. He honours the questions Thomas asks. And he invites Thomas – "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be distrusting but trusting." There is a lot at stake here for Thomas. Will he join the other followers even when he can no longer see Jesus? Will he follow the way of God when support may not be tangible? Will he give the trust needed for cooperation to happen? So Jesus stands alongside Thomas, gives him space, respects his question, trusts his judgement, invites his cooperation.

As then, so now. As with those disciples, so with us now. The need for the same openness. The same transparency. The same acknowledgement of woundedness. The same vulnerabilities. The same respectful invitation to

cooperate with Christ, and for that cooperation, the very Spirit of Christ. That same Spirit for the same sending, to share the good news of Christ with the people around us.

“Peace be with you. As the Father sends me, so I send you.”

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