

## **Knox Uniting Church Cluster**

**Sunday April 12<sup>th</sup> 2026 – (Year A. Easter 2)**

**Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Ferntree Gully Uniting Church**

**Bible passages: Psalm 16 and John 20:19-31 (NRSVUE)**

### ***“The Circle of trust”***

#### ***PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)***

My theme today is called, “The circle of trust”. In our gospel reading today the disciples are gathered together in a locked room after they had heard reports of the empty tomb. In their fear they had retreated into their small, trusted group for support. We might call it a ‘circle of trust’ – a circle of people who shared a common belief and purpose. While in their circle of trust, the risen Jesus appeared to them. But one of their number wasn’t with them. It was Thomas. When they caught up with Thomas later, they told him about seeing Jesus. How do you think Thomas felt at that moment? He was one of the 12 but did he still feel he was in the circle of trust after missing that special moment? How did he see himself? How did his doubts about what happened affect his faith in God? Today I’d like us to think about this idea of a circle of trust. What does it mean to be in a circle of trust in God? Do we sometimes feel not included or not worthy? How does the way we see our own circle of trust affect the way we see ourselves and the way we see others? How might our own circle of trust reach out to include and help others?

#### ***MESSAGE***

Play video clip from the movie “Meet the parents” showing the scene(s) about the ‘circle of trust’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHJGoZpFeM8>. In this movie, Jack, the Father-in-Law (to be), warns young Greg about how good he must be in order to be accepted into the ‘Burns Family Circle of Trust’ and throughout the whole movie (and the sequel) Jack keeps threatening Greg that he will be placed outside the circle of trust if he does anything unacceptable in Jack’s eyes.

How do you think Greg feels? What’s the message in this for us today and for the church?

In today’s story from John’s gospel, the disciples, full of doubts and fears, have locked themselves in a room. They have retreated into their own ‘circle of trust’. While in that room they have a wonderful encounter with the risen Jesus and their fear turns to joy. But Thomas wasn’t with them. He missed out. When the disciples later tell him all about it, his first reaction is to doubt their testimony. Thus, he earns for himself the rather disparaging label, “Doubting Thomas”.

Imagine if you were Thomas. Is doubt the main thing happening for you? Or is there something deeper? Like Thomas, would you feel left out of the ‘circle of trust’, like Greg, in ‘Meet the Parents’? How would this experience affect your faith?

I feel like we should do some ‘rethinking’ about Thomas.

I suggest that the label ‘Doubting Thomas’ is unfair. It suggests that he is somehow ‘less than’ the others, that his faith is inferior. But I don’t think this is the intended message in today’s story. Thomas is really no different to the others.

Compare Thomas to Peter who had his doubts after the tomb was empty. What about all the disciples struggling to understand who Jesus really was all through the gospels? If any of the other disciples had *not* been in the room that night, they probably would have reacted just like Thomas, based on their previous responses. Thomas therefore simply represents typical discipleship and the struggles of faith.

Thomas is therefore very normal! He simply struggles to comprehend the truth he has just heard and he wants some evidence - some proof. Who wouldn't? I know for sure that I would be exactly the same! Give me evidence! So, I am Thomas in this story and I'm sure many of you will identify with him too.

Let's think for a moment about his doubts and questions. I feel like we should also do some 'rethinking' about doubt.

Does having doubt mean our faith is weak?

I came across an excellent article during the week, called "The Gift of Doubt" by Joan Chittister from her book, "Between the Dark and the Daylight"<sup>1</sup>. Here are some of the things she says:

*'The problem is that certitude seduces us. It enables us to believe that what was said to be true is true because someone else said so. It simply cuts off thought. It arrests discussion in mid-flight. And yet we yearn for it with a passion'.*

*'Doubt is what shakes our arrogance and makes us look again at what we have never really looked at before. Without doubt there is little room for faith in anything. What we accept without question we will live without morality'.*

*'It is doubt, not certitude, that enables us to believe, because it requires us to think deeply about an entire subject, Only when we look beyond absolutes to understand every level of life can we possibly live life to the fullest, with the deepest kind of insight, with the greatest degree of compassion for others'.*

Do you think doubt might just be the very thing that leads us to faith – that enables us to believe?

Let's return then to our 'circle of trust', with an open mind about the place of doubt within that circle. Thomas is well and truly in God's circle of trust – even if he felt left out for a while. And if he's in that circle then so are we – with all of our doubts, uncertainties, imperfections and humanness. And this is a cause of great joy, just as the disciples felt this joy of being in the circle.

I chose this picture<sup>2</sup> today to go with my theme.

What is this picture saying to you?

For me the glass sphere is a kind of representation of the 'circle of trust'. And this sphere is being held in God's hand of love. The sphere could be just me, or it could be all people who have faith in God. Or it could be the whole world, since the whole scene behind is captured within the sphere by light refracting through the glass.



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<sup>1</sup> From Pilgrim Uniting Church website - <https://pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=36>

<sup>2</sup> From Pixabay free images.

All through the bible, God's circle of trust is like this. It's a place of belonging, of refuge, of safety, of inclusion, of grace, of mercy. It is sometimes called, our 'inheritance'.

In today's Psalm (Ps 16), the writer expresses their joy in belonging in this kind of place promised to them by God. It says, "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage ("delightful inheritance" in the NIV)" (v5-6). It appears to be referring to 'land' in some way and the idea of this 'Promised Land' was so important for the Israelites. But it wasn't just the physical inheritance of land being referred to - it represented being in a place of existence where God reveals himself in all ways to them. And the writer of the Psalm places their trust in the One who gives them that place.

Today I am calling this 'place' the 'circle of trust'. We could give it any number of names. It was by being in this 'circle' that the disciples, including Thomas, received an amazing gift from Jesus. The gift in that space came to them in three amazing ways: It came through the giving of peace (v19), and through the giving of the Holy Spirit (v 22), and through the empowering for mission in the world (v23). The disciples 'inheritance' was peace, indwelling of the Holy Spirit and empowerment for mission!

So, the circle of trust is a wonderful gift to us all and we're all in it.

What then? How do we respond?

I believe that this circle of trust requires a response. It requires that we place our trust in the creator of the circle, as in the picture which shows us placed in the 'hand of God'. And not only that, but it also requires that we *live* as people of trust, even though we still come with our doubts, since, as I said before, doubt can lead us to living as people of faith.

When it comes to Thomas, Jesus didn't tell him off for his doubts. But Jesus did challenge him towards even greater faith – to discover the 'blessing' of 'believing without seeing' (v 29). I guess that's the ultimate goal. This message would have been so relevant to the readers of this Gospel who had never seen the earthly or the risen Jesus but were being challenged to place their faith in what is unseen by earthly eyes. As we read in Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

As people who are like Thomas, we probably need to ask ourselves how our imperfect faith makes a difference in our lives. How do we live as people of faith?

How does your faith change how you see yourself? How you see others? How you act?  
How others see you?

That last question leads to my final point. How does our circle of faith affect others?

Now I'm no expert when it comes to the so-called 'paranormal' or 'supernatural' happenings. And I don't see 'auras' around people. But in a way, I do sense at times, as I'm sure you do, something different about certain people. An aura might be thought of as 'vibe' or 'atmosphere' or an 'energy' that a person has. Or to put it another way, we might simply say, "There's something about that person". There is a circle of "something" around them!

I've met certain Christian people over the years, in whose company I always feel accepted and cared for, even when I've done wrong or had my doubts. I feel comfortable and comforted in their presence. They exude grace, peace and kindness and being with them encourages me and lifts my spirit.

I want to be like that. I want to carry a circle of trust in my being in such a way that communicates those God-given qualities to others, through my words, actions or even in my silence. And I want to include others in that circle.

That's because our circle of trust is not just for us individually, or for each other in church. It is indeed something to be shared, in all the ways we can share it with others. In that way we take the creator of the circle of trust with us wherever we go.