In my sermon this morning I would like to define faith, explain perhaps the reason for the actions of the disciples and then Thomas’ perspective due to his absence.

Faith isn’t knowing for sure that something will happen –Faith is really just the opposite! Faith is Not Knowing that something will happen –It’s not being sure at all –but going ahead and taking that step anyway.

In today’s gospel story from John, the disciples really have their backs up against a wall. They sound like some of us when things are going wrong in our lives. Their whole world has come crashing down around them.
They’re terrified. The authorities are hot on their trail and they’re locked up in some cheap, Jerusalem motel. At the moment we meet them – they’re more than a little paranoid. And some of us can probably identify with that too! Now what we need to understand is that for three years or so Jesus had been with these guys. And for three years, he’d provided them with their strength– He’d been the one giving them all their courage. When Jesus was with them, they felt safe & secure. When Jesus was with them, they experienced his peace. But once Jesus had died, it seems that all their courage and all their faith died right along with him. So now they’d given up their dreams and most of them were getting ready to pack up and head back to Galilee.

According to John’s gospel, the scene is now three days after Jesus’ death –and the disciples are in hiding behind those locked doors. But now John says that somehow Jesus enters into that room and he stands among them. Somehow, he’s there – made present to them once again; Very gently he says the word: “Peace.” They can’t understand how this can be happening –they’re scared to death – they ain’t peaceful at all! –So, Jesus has to repeat himself and he says to them again: “Peace!” And then, as we heard in the story, Jesus does a really strange thing. It says he breaths over his friends and he says: “Here’s holy spirit! Here’s my spirit! Take it now!” Take it into your hearts
and feel what it’s like to have me back in your life again. Feel my presence – know that I’m still with you –Feel that empty hole where your faith and your courage used to be. Feel that hole filling up once again –Feel it filling up with God’s Spirit and with my love.” And so, we ask: Just what is it that John’s trying to tell us through this strange sounding story of his? I think his message boils down simply to this: That when Jesus was absent from his disciple’s hearts – they were full of fear. But when Jesus was present to them once again –their fears were removed and they were once again filled with his peace. Somehow that night, the disciples once again felt his presence and experienced his peace. Somehow that night, the disciples once again came to know Jesus as real and as present –but now in a very different way than before –And once they did that, (no matter how that all happened) they found their faith and they found their courage restored.

You know, so many of us do really well while we have support around us during difficult times –We find some faith and we find some courage to go on with life –We feel God’s presence in our lives – and we respond –So although many theologians refer to this Sunday as “doubting Thomas” Sunday; this morning I would like to propose a different way of looking at this famous scripture. I would like to cut Thomas some slack. I really don’t believe he was any different from the majority of us. Let’s be realistic. Imagine hearing your friends were in a room with locked doors and Jesus appears to them. You know these men and their tendencies. You would think a few of them would be overjoyed, some of them would have been speechless and a few more would have run as fast as the wind and once they reached the outside probably would have sold out saying, “I ain’t afraid of no ghost” because that’s what they would have thought, that it was a ghost. It was these men telling Thomas they had seen the Lord. Thomas, one who loved Jesus, perhaps felt left out like a kid whose friends tell him they had just seen Lebron or Bryce and perhaps received autographs. He wasn’t there! He had been left out! However, listen closely to the scripture because I believe Thomas wasn’t the one who did not believe:

***19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.***

Now to me, this shows Jesus did this because they had doubt. If all had been receptive to our Lord and Savior appearing before them why did John write? ***”20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.***Why was it necessary to do this? After all, he had prepared them, he said, I will rise again! Notice John says *“****Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.****”* Does this indicate they too had doubt? Were they scared of this figure that had appeared before them? Did they not recognize him as Jesus? Something definitely was amiss so Jesus said to them again, ***“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.25So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*** Did he say this because they said, “we didn’t believe it was him so he showed us his hands and his side.”

Poor Thomas, imagine again if you will, you are still grieving for Jesus, and the other ten were all a glow because they had seen Jesus, spoken with him, and received the Holy Spirit and you had not. How would you have felt? To me it is apparent he was not the only one who didn’t believe. This is all the slack I am giving Thomas however, it ends here. Remember I also stated I would like to propose a different way of looking at this famous scripture: well here goes. Thomas was like so many of us, he gave a condition to which he would believe. We don’t want to believe unless God does something for us first. In our everyday lives we pray and ask God for this and that… but it is conditional… we promise God to be faithful and obedient… but it is conditional. **I am reminded of a story I heard where a betting man is at the horse race track and he is in need of a win, he begins to pray to God asking him to allow his horse to win. As the race unfolds the man is praying fervently. Oh God please let my horse win… the horses approach the final turn the man looks up and sees his horse is in front and he says, “ok God you can let him go now I got him”.** How many of us realize we have nothing without God? And we never will! Thomas being human agreed to believe with conditions. **Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”**

The beauty of the story is, Jesus’ love for us, because he loved Thomas he appeared a week later. Have any of us given any thought to why Jesus appeared a week later? Maybe to allow Thomas to stew in his own brooding, maybe he wanted to see what the other disciples who received the Holy Spirit would do. Or maybe he was busy with his father making plans for us and our future, deciding what to do with this vast and steady growing army of disciples that would go forth in his name. Whatever the reason was for the delay in his return Jesus accepted the conditions given by Thomas. I would like to say to you today Jesus’ love is unconditional. He died for our sake and rose again so we might believe.

Moving forward, it is interesting that the other scriptures for today deal with community. As Christianity grew and grows we were and are called to walk in the light of Christ as one, not as individuals. In the gospel today, John closes by telling us “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” In first John he is worried that his readers will be led astray by community members who have split off from the group (2:19).

According to John, these people say they know Jesus but live as though they do not (2:4-6). They say they are in the light, but their actions suggest otherwise (2:9). They claim that they have no sin, but their claim is a lie (1:8).

**In short, they talk the talk but do not walk the walk.**
In the view of 1 John, the truth is not simply something we think or believe, it is something we do. I implore us to always remember that Jesus’ calls for us to act, to do unto others as we would have others to do unto us. To provide that unconditional love! The same love Jesus had for Thomas and has for us. If we will it opens our lives up to the "cleansing" of our actions, to new ways of being and doing. Some of us are indeed a people that must see and touch the wounds of our lord and savior. Especially in a world where we have been deceived by so many false prophets and wounded by so many social ills such as, violence and injustice.

Oh, if only he could appear shining in all his glory, the world, our community would be a different place. I truly believe etched on John’s heart and mind when he wrote his epistle was the encounter before when Jesus appeared to them and showed his wounds and spoke to them about sins and forgiving. He did so because he was concerned his community had become one that doubted.

I don’t know about you… but I don’t need to see the mark of the nails in his hand… I don’t need to put my hand in his side… I know he lives… because he lives in me and you and what we say and do are testimony of our belief. Jesus Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Amen