In the spring of 1997, it fell to me to conduct a memorial service for a friend, also a minister. Susan and I had formed a friendship with him and his wife in the very early years of our ministries. We’d kept in touch over the years and across the miles. Then in 1993, we both found ourselves in suburban Detroit. I had functioned as his pastor during his final illness. After the memorial service, there was a luncheon. Susan and I sat with Dorothy, my friend’s widow, and with Ruth, who’d been church organist in their first parish. I can’t remember exactly how it had come up, but Dorothy made some reference to life after death. Then, parenthetically, she remarked to the organist, “But I know you don’t believe in the resurrection, do you Ruth.” She didn’t make the statement as a criticism. In fact, she and her husband had placed a great value on their friendship with Ruth. Dorothy was simply stating a fact, without judgment. “But I know you don’t believe in the resurrection.”

I was sincerely hoping that my friend’s widow wouldn’t use the occasion to ask me to expound on eternal life. I was emotionally drained myself. The last thing I wanted was to defend a doctrine––and I’m sure that Ruth wasn’t disposed to hash it over, either. Nobody was in the mood for a theological discussion. Fortunately, Dorothy wasn’t looking for reassurance, or for a rehearsal of the arguments that supported her faith. She’d made the observation in passing, and the conversation moved on to something else.

Later, I found myself thinking about the issue. The question had affected me on two different levels. On the one level, as my friend had approached the end of his life, the hope of resurrection had gripped me more powerfully than ever. At Easter, as my friend approached the end of his life, I found myself thinking rather naively about messages I might send with him, to take directly to the risen, ascended Lord. I felt strongly that his next Easter would find him celebrating the culmination of his lifelong faith. But on another level, I asked myself how a person might come to believe in the resurrection to eternal life, when so many are skeptical if not downright derisive of such a belief?

This is what I decided. I decided that it’s not possible to know anything at all absolutely for sure. There’s nothing––absolutely nothing at all––that can’t be questioned, argued against, and disbelieved. Even the reality of the universe itself is debatable. For example, there’s a school of thought in philosophy called “solipsism.” Solipsism is the belief that the entire universe is nothing more than a dream in my own mind. That nothing and no one, in fact, really exists outside my own imagination. I don’t believe that solipsism tells the truth about what’s real and what’s not. But there’s no argument sufficient to rule it out conclusively.

It’s not possible to know anything at all absolutely for sure. For example, I can’t go back to the first century and investigate directly claims that Jesus was raised from the dead. Not even the most skillful historians can do that, including that small minority of scholars known as the “Jesus Seminar.” So, how does a person ever come to believe in Jesus’ resurrection? What I decided was this: When it comes to the resurrection, I believe what the church believes.
What do I mean by that? I don’t mean that when it comes to the resurrection, I defer to somebody else to think for me. I don’t mean that when it comes to the resurrection, I take the word of a church bureaucrat, or the vote of a General Assembly, or even the argument of some theologian. What I do mean is to testify that faith can be borrowed. Once upon a time I resolved to borrow for myself the faith cherished by the whole community of Christian people for twenty centuries, and let that faith grow in me. What I mean is that I determined to trust this community--I trust it to teach me, I trust it to share its experience with me, I trust it to challenge me and engage me at every level from the simplest level to the most sophisticated.

When I was about 17 years old, I began to read the New Testament, one chapter a day. I was reading to gather information to use in a debate with a friend. In other words, I was looking for ammunition to use against him. Much to my own surprise, when I finished the last chapter of the last book, I discovered that something had happened to me. I had moved from being outside to being inside the faith. I can’t say exactly when or how that happened. All I know is that something in me responded with trust to the testimony of the New Testament--which is, of course, the testimony of that first generation of Christians. I decided then to see whether I could also trust the contemporary community of Jesus Christ--in other words, trust the church I was supposed to be a part of, but which I seldom visited. I found that church at the corner of 7th and Ella Streets in Beatrice, Nebraska to be a mixed bag of people, some bringing very little credit to the gospel, while others cherished the faith even though life had tested them severely. With all its shortcomings, I trusted that community. By extension I learned, a little at a time, to trust the whole church, the church universal, the church which extends over boundaries of denomination and space and time. In short, I apprenticed myself to that community, the community of faith, what the Creed calls “the holy catholic church,” represented in specific congregations like this one. Just as though I’d joined the Marine Corps or the Navy, I gave myself to the church as a raw recruit. What I wanted was that the church might nurture me, form me, help me to grow into a person of faith. And that’s what they did: Margarette Silverthorne, Hubert Sias, Truman Christian, Keith Stephenson, Gus Ferré and others I can name one by one--but even more, that vast body we call “the communion of saints”--people of our generation and of earlier generations who engaged me in serious dialogue with them.

I don’t yield my right to have personal opinions. I don’t yield my right of dissent. But the truth is this: that I trust the community. I have every reason to believe what the church--the great church--believes. This is by no means what they call a “blind” faith. In fact, I believe that this faith has cleared my vision, extended my sight. I believe in the resurrection to eternal life not because I’ve gathered arguments sufficient to overcome all objections. I believe because the church has shared its testimony with me--the church has told me what she has seen. And I believe because the faith of the church plucks some string deep inside me--it strikes some harmony with the structure of my soul. It resonates with the architecture of my inward being. Has Jesus risen from the dead? I believe what the church believes.

Now, of course, this belief isn’t scientific. But then again, the process of learning to believe isn’t all that different from the processes learned in a science classroom. If a person wants to become a scientist, what does she do first? The first thing she does is to become an apprentice. She has to learn the scientific tradition, and she has to learn that from a community of people who believe in it, practice it, and hand it on to the next generation. For a person to learn science, that person first of all has to trust the community of scientists--trust that community which speaks a common language, shares certain convictions. To learn science, you have to believe that you can
feel confident about some things. That, for example, the law of gravity isn’t just a matter of opinion, but that truth itself is at stake. So far, that’s exactly how people learn to be Christians, too.

A few decades ago, Thomas Kuhn wrote a book called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. His thesis was that scientific knowledge doesn’t necessarily increase incrementally—that is, just a little bit at a time. In other words, it’s not necessarily true that knowledge slowly evolves into more knowledge. Rather, he says, scientific knowledge tends to take great leaps forward when some scientist rejects accepted theory and breaks the mold. And how does that happen? By intuition. Because some researcher gets a hunch. The hunch leads to setting up experiments to put the hunch to the test. Sometimes, the experiment confirms what began as a hunch. Einstein’s theory of relativity began as a hunch. Now this is not very different from the way that faith grows and develops. Many insights of faith begin with an intuition, a hunch, if you will. As in science, that intuition, that hunch is rooted in some experience, or some encounter—something that just won’t let you go. That intuition can be tested with other people to see how well it squares with known facts. Does it provide a more comprehensive answer? Does it take into account more of human experience? Does it at least neutralize all the possible objections?

There are different ways of knowing things, but they all begin the same way. They all begin with an act of trust. We trust this community, rather than some other, to be our mentor. We apprentice ourselves to this tradition, rather than another. We learn from those with more experience than we have. We learn their language, their point of view, and make it our own. Science as well as religious belief rests on faith—trusting that there is something to be known, and that there are those who can lead us to know it.

I would argue that Christian faith need never be “blind” faith. Neither science nor faith is infallible. But faith rests on reliable foundations. Today, we read John’s story about how Jesus appeared to his disciples after his crucifixion. The story includes doubt and belief. Not a cynical doubt, not a negative, corrosive, destructive kind of doubt. Thomas doubts because he’s afraid to take a chance on being disappointed. He wants to believe—he’d like nothing more than to believe—but like the rest of us, he’s on guard. Like us, he’s had the experience of being let down. Not this time! His doubt is his suit of armor, his shield against one more disillusionment.

The disciples, huddled in the closed room, had sensed a presence among them. Turning to look into the shadows, they saw a figure. The figure spoke. They heard him say, “Peace be with you.” Thomas wasn’t there that night. Later, when Thomas came back, those who’d met the risen Lord stumbled all over themselves to blurt out what they’d experienced. Thomas erected his protective armor, not daring to hope that what they told him was true. When Jesus repeated his appearance the following Sunday, Thomas was in the room. I’m sure Thomas was thrilled to shed his skepticism. He’d wanted to believe that God would step in to vindicate Jesus’ ministry; that God would untangle what had been intended for evil and turn it to good. He’d wanted to believe that there was more to Jesus than could be snuffed out at the whim of the powers—that-be. In that closed room, God enlisted Thomas as a witness. God had reopened the Jesus question. Though Jesus’ powerful opponents had managed to beat the life out of him, God wouldn’t allow them to have the last word.

When Thomas blurted out his recognition of the risen Lord, Jesus replied, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” “Blessed,” he said. “Blessed.” That would include many of us gathered here. We have not seen. Yet, though we doubt, we also believe. How have we come to believe? We might be able to recite arguments that helped to
clear the way for our believing. But the truth is, the credit belongs to God. God’s Spirit has spoken to our spirits. Our intuition perceives this testimony, assesses it, and when we begin to rest our weight on it, it holds. It holds because there’s something solid here. Something solid which has formed a firm foundation upon which the whole church has staked its life.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” I believe what the church believes.

O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD!
HOW UNSEARCHABLE ARE GOD’S JUDGMENTS
AND HOW INSCRUTABLE GOD’S WAYS!
FOR FROM GOD AND THROUGH GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS.
TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER.