Some people describe the life of faith as something that bears a lot of resemblance to a magic trick. As a life long Christian, this seems strange to me. The life of faith is about acting with compassion and intelligence. This has never been more clear than today, as we respond to the challenges of the Coronavirus epidemic.

An epidemic reveals. What this epidemic is revealing, ever more clearly, is the need to act with compassion and to use our intelligence. For us, people in covenant with the God of truth and love, we pursue our lives with compassion and intelligence. As we look back at how the epidemic has spread around the world we see an astonishing absence of compassion and intelligence in many nations around the world.

Spain was one of the first nations outside of China to see a dramatic rise in Coronavirus infections. At the end of February Spain had just 25 cases. By the middle of March the disease had spread to more than 8000 people. By April 18th more than 190,000 people had been diagnosed with the Coronavirus.

The tragic number of deaths in Spain is the result of several grievous errors. For many years, the government in Spain has reduced spending on the national health care system. Reductions in funding for nurses, doctors and hospitals have continued through the present administration, which I would point out is from the left-leaning social democratic party.

The tragedy in Spain was also caused by a failure to impose social and physical restrictions on the population. March 8th was International Women’s Day. Tens of thousands of people, including the wife of the Prime Minister, marched in the streets of Madrid. Many thousands marched to support the rights of women. A smaller number of people marched in opposition to them. The next day, on March 9th health agencies in Spain reported twice as many coronavirus cases as the day before. As of today, more than 20,000 people have died from COVID 19 in Spain.

We find ourselves in a frightening place, but the truth is not especially complicated. We must act with compassion and intelligence.

After seeing the cases of COVID 19 rise quickly in Spain and Italy, most European nations quickly restricted movement and activity of their people. Most, but not the United Kingdom. As other nations were closing their borders and shutting down schools, public gatherings and non-essential work, the United Kingdom announced a very different strategy on March 12th. By March 12th there were over 700 cases of the Coronavirus in the United Kingdom. Yet on March 12th, the government’s chief scientific advisor and the Prime Minister announced their strategy to allow the virus to become established in the general population, and to take moderate measures to protect those over the age of 70, such as restricting them from cruises. The chief scientific advisor admitted that, with an expected fatality rate of 1%, pursuing a strategy of herd immunity without the use of a vaccine could lead to the deaths 400,000 people in the UK. If the Conservative Party government of Boris Johnson had not changed strategies very quickly, the number of the deaths from the Coronavirus would probably have been more than half a million in the UK alone.

As of today, more than 16,000 people have died from COVID 19 in the United Kingdom. This is a tragedy. Around the world, the tragedy of a lack of intelligent thought and compassion has not been constrained by political position. An epidemic reveals. Today it is revealing a tragic lack of compassionate, intelligent leadership in the UK, led by the conservatives and a lack of compassionate, intelligent leadership in Spain, led by the liberal social democrats. Why is it so difficult for us to act with intelligence and compassion?

Perhaps we are afraid of being treated the way Thomas, the disciple, has been treated by Christians for centuries. Thomas’ name has become a point of ridicule for little children all over the world; “Don’t be a doubting Thomas!” For adults, Thomas has been used as the prime example of what one should not do or say as a disciple of Christ.

Thomas’ grievous mistake was to think independently of others. Thomas’ mistake was to demand more proof. Thomas’ mistake was to question the account of the other disciples. Thomas’ mistake was to
refuse to give in to the group consensus. Thomas’ mistake was to pursue the truth of the matter. Thomas’ mistake was to raise his voice, with a question.

Right now, we need more people to act like Thomas. We need more people to ask questions. We need more people to question the group consensus. We need more people to pursue the truth of the matter. We need more people to raise their voices, with questions.

Thomas was pursuing the truth and attempting to act with intelligence. Thomas refused to accept the account of the other disciples. He said, *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.*

*A week later Jesus’ disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”* Then Jesus said to Thomas, *“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”* Thomas was seeking the truth, and Jesus responded to Thomas with compassion.

Jesus could have responded to Thomas the way many Christians have responded to those who ask the disturbing question. Jesus could have made Thomas an object of ridicule. Jesus could have made accusations against him. Jesus could have thrown him out of the group. But Thomas is not an object of ridicule for Jesus. Thomas creates an opportunity for compassion and for telling the truth. In this climactic story in the Gospel of John, Jesus and Thomas witness to the synthesis of compassion and intelligence.

Through Thomas’ actions, faith is revealed. This becomes apparent especially if you read the Gospel of John from beginning to end. The question underlying the entire Gospel of John is “Who is Jesus?” As the chapters progress the Samaritan Woman, Simon Peter, Blind Bartimaeus and Martha provide increasingly insightful answers to this question. “Who is Jesus?” Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Holy One of God. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Son of God.

It is left to Thomas, the disciple who doubted the story of the other disciples, to provide the final answer to the question. Thomas is the only person in the Gospel of John to address Jesus as *My Lord and my God!* Thomas is the only person in any of the Gospels to identify Christ Jesus as God. Thomas’ doubts and questions, Thomas’ independence, Thomas’ insistence on raising his voice lead to a relationship of compassion and understanding. It should be that way for us as well.

I thought about Thomas as I listened to the story of Jason Hargrove. Until a few weeks ago Mr. Hargrove was a bus driver in Detroit, MI. He was 50 years old, married and the father of six children. At the end of his shift, on March 21st he made a very public complaint about a passenger on his bus who coughed on him without covering her mouth. Eleven days later he was dead. He was just trying to do his job. He was just trying to provide for his family.

Jason raised his voice about the seriousness of the epidemic. On March 21st, the day of his complaint, there were about 500 confirmed Coronavirus infections in Michigan, but just about a dozen deaths. Many people were not taking the threat seriously, but Jason saw that life could not go on as normal. Jason posted a video on YouTube, and said, “This coronavirus is for real.” Jason’s YouTube video was a call for compassion and intelligence.

So today we give thanks and pray for all of the essential workers who make some sort of normal life possible for the rest of us. We pray for bus drivers, grocery store clerks and sanitation workers. We pray for all who continue to serve, in public, in places that put their health at risk, in spite of the danger.

Today we give thanks for those who, like Thomas and Jason, raise their voices and ask the uncomfortable question. We pray for the leaders of our community, our state and our nation. We pray our leaders would understand that 60 dead transit workers in New York City means tragic loss and grief for sixty families. We pray they would understand that more than 7000 coronavirus deaths in nursing homes across America is not an indication of a successful response. We pray that, as people in covenant with the God of truth and love, we would follow Thomas’ example. We pray to pursue lives of faith, which is a life of compassion and intelligence.