

OPENING:

“Thomas” had DOUBTS.

Not only “Thomas, One of the Twelve”

But “Thomas Paine”, the 18th century American patriot, author of *Common Sense*, published 250 years ago this year.

Paine had doubts about God, about organized religion, about Jesus and his divinity. All sorts of doubts.

Those doubts were revolutionary at the time, at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution. Even a hundred years later, Teddy Roosevelt would refer to Paine as “that filthy little Atheist.”¹

They actually read pretty tame today. Here’s a sampling from Paine’s writing:

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church (by which he meant “Muslim”), by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of.

My own mind is my own church. (Paine goes on)

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”²

We read Thomas Paine in Seminary, I guess as an early example of the modern attack on religion, on the historicity of the Bible, and all that.

I remember, as we read Paine a Professor saying:

“Every youth group that you ever will be involved in will have a ‘Thomas Paine’ in it.”

Paine, to me, sounds a little over-caffeinated in his denunciations of the church, an example maybe of the “queen doth protest too much.”

DOUBTS

Regardless, Paine had DOUBTS,

And so do you and so do I.

“Doubt” as a concept has been elevated in recent years (perhaps because it used to not be allowed) that’s almost become its own idol.

¹ Theodore Roosevelt. 1888. *Gouverneur Morris* Boston, 251.

² Thomas Paine. 1794. *The Age of Reason*. <https://sites.pitt.edu/~syd/pain.html>

Skepticism and cynicism are the currencies of the age such that... in recent years, Thomas has undergone a Rehabilitation in the Church, he should no longer be known as “doubting Thomas” but “demanding Thomas,” “curious Thomas,” “probing Thomas,” “realistic Thomas.”

Here’s the thing about doubt.

Doubt is perfectly fine, of course, if it’s about something that you don’t really care about. “I doubt the Virgin Birth, I doubt the Trinity.”

You have gained “doubt” but lost nothing

But there is such thing as too much doubt. If you doubt that someone is your friend, that makes you insecure. If you have doubt in your marriage, it leads to resentment.

If we have doubt in our institutions, it leads to mistrust.

True doubt is a hard place to always be.

So, someone once said. Be careful with doubt: Just because Mother Theresa had doubts and so do you, does not mean that you are the same.³

ST. TIMOTHY’S

At our last Vestry meeting, I was expressing some of my doubts about the trials and tribulations that we were facing as a church. After I voiced these uncertainties, I quoted Thomas Paine and the famous opening lines from his *Common Sense* in that year 1776:

“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

I was referring to our staffing issues—our ongoing search for an Associate Rector, likewise our search for a Pre-School Director, and this week—I hope that you read the announcement on Wednesday—the news that our beloved Parish Administrator would be stepping down this month.

The Vestry liked that line—“These are the times that try men’s souls”—so much that I used it again at Staff meeting this week and I am using here today with you all.

It can be our rallying cry along alongside Paine’s other famous sentence from *Common Sense*:

“This is no time for sunshine patriots” (in 1776 or, in this year of our Lord, 2026).

Now, you might be thinking, it’s one thing for Thomas to have doubts, he was,

³ [The Brothers Zahl Episode 14: Faith \(fireside.fm\)](#)

what, the 11th out of 12 in the ‘disciple depth chart’ but you Charles, you are our leader. That’s another deal entirely.

And I know that the first thing you are going to do is tell me not to doubt, that it will be okay.

I happened to believe that, that’s it’s going to be okay, but I was thinking: if the Church, in its wisdom, every year has... on its calendar... this thing called Easter Sunday, the biggest feast day of the year, with so much energy and excitement and people. Full of Faith and Belief and celebration.

And then, every year, turns around, and the very next week, has this story about doubt and unbelief.

Then maybe I can admit my doubts as well.

The world around us, of course, is also full of doubts. I don’t need to remind anyone of that. And they make our personal ones and the ones to do with this parish seem small in comparison.

THOMAS

So let’s return to the story, this familiar one (again, we get it every year) of Thomas and the Upper Room.

Notice the response to Thomas’s doubts... by the disciples and then by Jesus. First, from the disciples:... well... we don’t actually know what the disciples did or said after Thomas gives his famous declaration that “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my fingers in the mark of the nails, I will not believe.”

All we know is that the disciples stuck together, that there they were all there together a week later. They remained a community and gathered once more in the Upper Room for “Easter 2.”

And they did not argue with Thomas, or at least we don’t hear about, nor do we hear them say: “it’s going to be okay, everything is going to be all right.”

Likewise, when Jesus shows up the next Sunday, the week after Easter, Doubting Thomas Sunday in the lectionary, he also does not say “it’s going to be okay, it’s going to be all right.”

Instead Jesus is present, utterly there, in the most viscerally anatomical way possible.

Jesus says to Thomas: “Come on big guy, give me a hug.... Even better... let’s

make good on that request of yours... let's go even deeper into my gooey self." Jesus does that BEFORE he says the next thing: "Do not doubt but believe" a statement which comes off as almost an afterthought. When you have the experience of the living God that Thomas had had, words seem truly unnecessary.

ST. TIMOTHY'S

I might have preached this before, but I will preach it again, and preach it to myself: the Opposite of Faith is not doubt.

The opposite of Faith is not doubt, but control.

People who have been a part of this church way longer than I have told stories about St. Timothy's and they tend to go like this.

When times get tough, "the times that try men and women's souls" God comes through.

People that I know and trust tell me that.

John McGrath and Betsy Bosworth and Maria LaWalt.

They tell stories about how "we lost X.... and then all the sudden we got Y."

How we were facing *this* problem, but then *that* happened.

I cannot even remember the particulars of them at this point.

Oftentimes it involves needing money and hat being passed in Henry Hall, or a sewage problem on the ground and a toilet entering the sanctuary.

A door closing and other opening.

I will admit that I am suspicious of those stories. They sound too good to be true.

They sound like Jesus showing up after he had been crucified and buried.

They sound like life in the amidst of pain. Hope in the midst of suffering.

AMEN