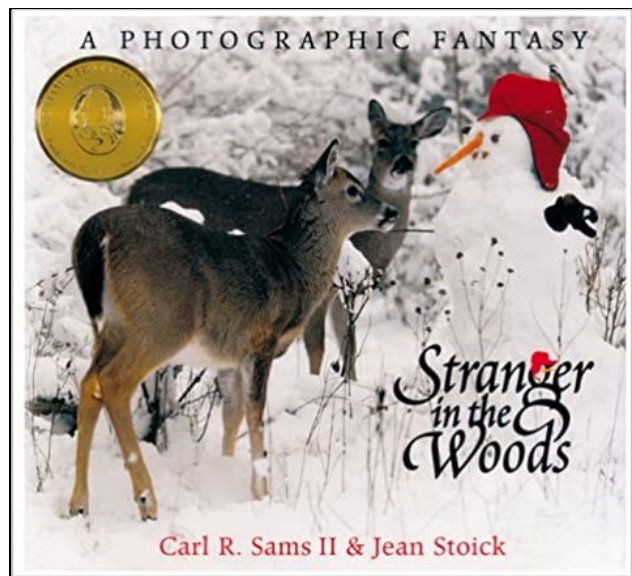


Living Grace

2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER

"NOW CAN YOU BELIEVE?"



In *Stranger in the Woods*, after snowflakes twist and turn all through the night, the forest animals are awakened by the birds' warning that there is a stranger in the woods. They set out to discover if there is danger and find a silent stranger with a floppy-eared hat and a carrot nose. Who is this stranger? The animals want to know. Why has he come to the forest? Why did he arrive after a winter storm? What wonderful surprises does he bring?

Read-aloud video link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBe_M9HUDTM

Sunday Gospel

JOHN 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to 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 into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

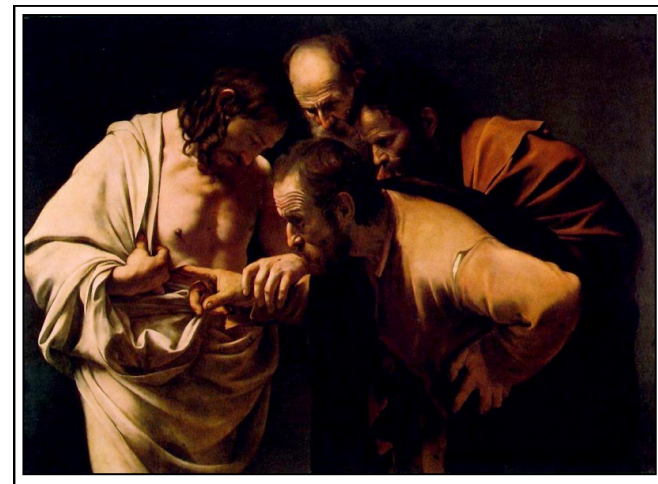
Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me?"

Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

Art & Faith

EXPLORING THE BEAUTY & TRADITION OF SACRED ART



THE INCREDULITY OF SAINT THOMAS
Oil painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio ~ 1602-1602
Sanssouci Picture Gallery ~ Postdam, Germany

EXPLORING THE ART: BRIDGE BETWEEN HEAVN AND EARTH

This famous painting portrays the Gospel scene with drama and intensity. Known for his gritty realism, Caravaggio has Jesus grasping the hand of the apostle Thomas and thrusting it deep within the wound at his side, powerfully aligning their hands to form a lance. Thomas' face expresses profound surprise as his finger thrusts deep into Jesus' wound. The composition of the painting is concentrated within a solid Romanesque archway formed by the outline of the four figures clustered intimately together, and swamped in theatrical darkness, bringing to life the central figures as if lit upon a stage. Christ is without a halo or any other sign of His divinity but comes to them as a man made of flesh and blood rather than as a disembodied spirit, so His resurrection is understood in literal terms, and is all the more miraculous.

Caravaggio's use of such realistic human images was polarizing to Catholic critics of his time with some considering it gross and indecent. Religious paintings had up to this point mostly been drawn from idealized imaginings of biblical and Godly themes. By contrast, Caravaggio used life models to render his work realistic, thereby drawing the heavens down to earth and into nature.

Making the Connections

FOR ADULTS

JESUS' ESSENCE IS THE SAME, YET HIS FORM HAS CHANGED. WILL YOU BELIEVE?

In our children's story word spreads, "Stranger in the woods!" and the animals are initially fearful and nervous. Their fearful reaction turns into curiosity and then into action. "I have to go and check this out!" The animals draw near the "stranger" with excitement but also trepidation. Given their different natures, some of the animals are more fearful than others. Some stay away, some approach curiously, and some fly ahead to be the first to see this new stranger in their woods. Likewise, the disciples were a group of people with very different natures. When Jesus makes an appearance after his resurrection, word travels quickly, and the disciples reacted differently to the news. Doubting Thomas is highlighted in this passage, though many others who did not see Jesus in person must have had doubts, too. You can imagine the animals trying to explain the stranger they saw to other animals in the woods. The snowman was a creature none of them had ever seen before. The disciples had the same challenge trying to explain what it was like to see the Risen Lord - a reality they had never encountered before.

The children's story offers an image to help us understand how Jesus could be of the same nature, even though he looked different. Throughout history, Jesus has been experienced in three different natures. First the historical Jesus, the bodily person that lived in human form on this earth as one of us. Then, as the Risen Jesus, where his physical appearance changed on many occasions, but at the same time he was recognizable to all who knew him. Finally, there is the ascended Jesus, who we walk with now in the present as the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in our lives. A snowman has one shape and form present under 32 degrees as snow and ice. Spring comes and "the forest starts to sing and the trees grow new leaves", and the snowman melts into water. The snowman still consists of the same molecules, but now exists in the form of a puddle of water. As summer comes, the elements are changed once again and rise (like Jesus!) into steam, evaporating into the air and dispersed.

Making the Connections

FOR CHILDREN

YOUR STORY: Have you ever had a surprise encounter with something or someone that was not familiar? How did it make you feel? Were others caught off guard as much as you were? How did you respond?

THE CHILDRENS' STORY: How did the animals react when they saw a snowman for the first time? How would they feel when the snowman disappeared? When the snowman melts, will he be gone or still present but in a new form? What will happen when summer comes and the ice, now water, turns to steam?

THE GOSPEL STORY: What do you think it was like when Jesus' best friends saw him after his death for the first time? Do you think he looked the same? Did they recognize him?

How might Jesus have been the same being but present to the apostles in a new form? What might this mean on how we can experience the present of Jesus today?

Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



QUESTION OF THE WEEK: Does reflecting on how water is able to be changed into three forms - water, ice and steam - help you to understand how Jesus could be human, risen, and spirit? Talk about this as a family.

CHARACTER QUALITIES: WONDER
FELT EXPERIENCE

FAMILY ACTIVITIES: Conduct a science experiment as a family starting with a large piece of ice. Allow the ice to melt overnight. Talk about how the same substance can change forms. Now put the water in a pan on the stove and watch it evaporate. Discuss the following: Now what form does the water take? Where does it go? How can we make the connections between the steam and the Holy Spirit? How does this experiment mirror the changes that Jesus went through in his human, risen and spirit self. What is the relationship of Jesus to the Holy Spirit? Can the Holy Spirit travel faster than Jesus in his human form could? How does this experiment help solidify our faith experience as real and tangible?

Biblical Background

JOHN 20:19-31

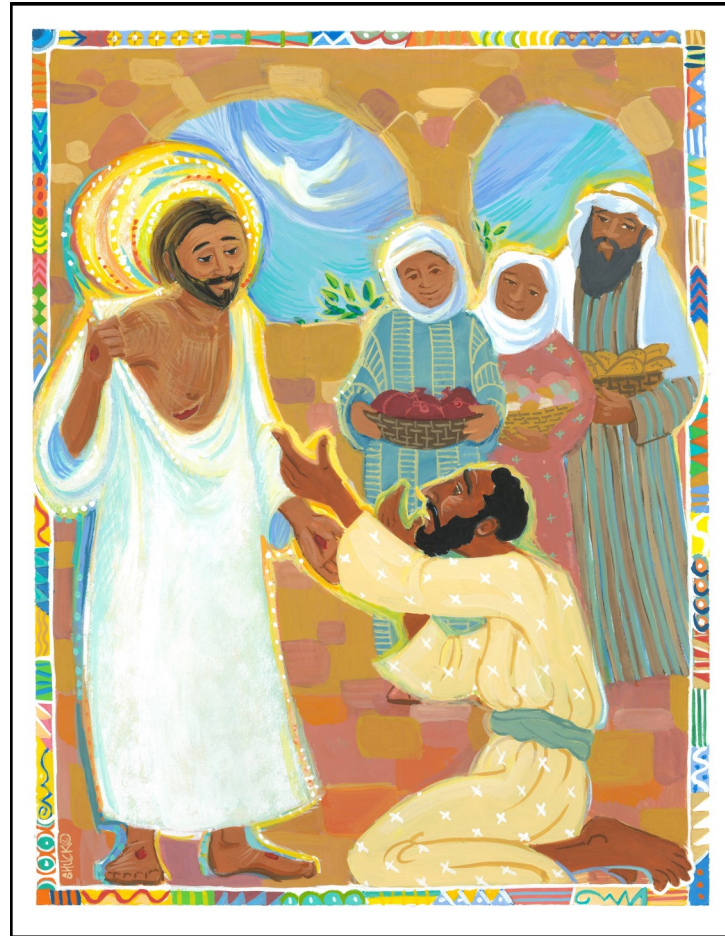
GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: Jesus appears to the disciples while they are gathered behind locked doors in fear of the same Jewish religious authorities who had orchestrated the death of Jesus. That room was most likely the same room where Jesus had celebrated the Passover meal in with them. The fact that the disciples were gathered behind doors that were locked would have been suspicious. The Middle East is an "open door" culture. Everybody does their best to know everything about everyone else. When you close and lock a door suspicions about your activities will certainly rise. The disciples must have felt secure. This explains the surprise (if not shock!) of the disciples when Jesus suddenly appears before them. He has passed through the door and has entered the room.

TERMS: *Doubt* is not the absence of faith. Biblical faith is built in three parts. First you need to have specific knowledge about a person or an event. Jesus presents himself to the disciples and invites them to examine his body; to probe his wounds with their hands. In doing so they come to a knowledge that Jesus has returned from the grave. Second, upon the knowledge you then can add the element of belief. You come to believe that Jesus conquered the grave based on the knowledge that is gleaned from their careful examination of the resurrected body of Jesus. Third, upon knowledge of and belief in the resurrected Jesus you add the final element of trust. Trust is based on your knowledge and belief. It is that trust that confirms in your spirit that if Jesus has conquered the grave, you will as well. Thomas is not a doubter in a negative sense. He wants to see Jesus and examine his body. When encouraged to do so he demurs. He comes quickly to the conclusion that Jesus is his Lord and God. Knowledge, belief and trust. It is a progression that all believers need to experience. This kind of faith that is needed of the early Christian community.

CULTURAL INSIGHT: The message of the resurrection will go forth from the locked doors of the Upper Room into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and eventually to the whole of the Roman Empire. From fear will come faith. Faith in the resurrected Jesus is destined to transform the world. Doors closed and locked keep the Good News safe, but under wraps. The Spirit seeks the freedom to open the doors and allow lives have been transformed by the Gospel to share the Good News

INSIGHT INTO MEANING: The Apostles need to be filled with the Spirit of God before they can be sent out to do the works of Father. That path is clear. They will have to follow the example of Jesus and will certainly experience great humiliation and suffering. In the end they will also conquer sin and death. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they can walk in union Jesus. He has set the example that they will have to follow. "As the Father has sent me so now I send you". They leave behind the Upper Room where behind closed doors they were filled with fear to bring a message of hope, the message of the Gospel, to the ends of the earth. That mission is still very much alive today. We each have a role to play in helping the Kingdom of God break forth in the world, on earth as it is in heaven.

Gospel Illustration



"MY LORD AND MY GOD" BY VICKI SHUCK

Jesus holds us, like Thomas, in compassion in our unbelief.

Yet he keeps inviting...meet me in the suffering, touch it in belief, and you will find life in my name.