



Dappled Things

Luke 24:36-48

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Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

He was setting up a new software program on his computer. Prompted to the next step, he began reading an excerpt of the Gettysburg Address into the computer's microphone. The new speech-activated software was learning each nuance of his voice so he could write. Oh, he had been writing for a long time. A journalist and short story author, Kevin made a living as a writer despite the congenital birth defect -- having a left arm that was only two thirds the length of his right arm with fingers but no wrist. He had managed just fine. Fine that is, until the motorcycle accident nearly claimed his life and rendered his right arm unusable. Now, he was finding a new way forward - learning to write with the use of voice-activated software. He was reading into the microphone when his dog and cat entered the room embroiled in a skirmish. He got distracted by the chaos:

Bark, bark, Meow, meow, Bark, bark, meow, meow!

Kevin glanced back over at his computer and his new software was interpreting the chaos -- How, how, why, why, how, how, why, why?

And with these Two fundamental questions we are divided into dog people and cat people. Two questions that help us find our way in the world.

Kling's book is entitled: "The Dog Says How"

Are you a dog person or a cat person? Perhaps you are both.

I've been asking "How" questions my whole life. I'm a DOG person.

- * How do you make lemon chicken piccata ?
- * How do you spell piccata?
- * How do you build a Bear-proof Chicken coop?
- * How do I set up my new iPhone?

... and I would not be the musician I am today without the curiosity to ask "How ..

- * How does the organ work?
- * How do you get a congregation to sing?

* How do I practice so that my hands and feet can navigate all those keyboards and pedals? (I remember struggling with a particularly difficult passage in an organ symphony as I was preparing for one of my graduate recitals. I asked my professor for insight into how I could address these four measures of music that had eluded me. I'll never forget his reply - "Jeff, there's nothing in those four measures of music that slowly repeating it 300 times a day for the next week won't fix.") He was right!

* and of course, there's the quintessential musical/philosophical question which we don't have time for today:

How do you solve a problem like Maria?

I'm a Dog person.

Questions came as I prepared for our time together today:

How do you preach Easter 3 weeks AFTER Easter?

How do you keep that momentum of the season going?

How could the Disciples not know that was Jesus standing before them?

My sermon began to take shape in the days after Easter and my ideas were ready to be spilled onto the printed page when the phone call came:

Richard Sales was dead. Gone.

And the questions started again:

I hung up the phone in shock and disbelief - consumed with a numbness that washed over, in, and through my whole being. A sea of questions began to flood my mind as the dam broke. . . How? How could this happen? How could he be

here with us one moment and gone the next? How do I share this news with the choir?

I was overwhelmed: How do I preach in the wake of this horrible loss . . . and immediately the spirit's voice deep within me answered with quiet assurance: "How can you NOT preach?"

How can our hearts be so empty and so full at the same time? Today's Gospel lesson feels a bit more real to us as we face death and come to grips with a new reality. The disciples were gathered together to comfort each other. To process the tragic events of the past few days. How did this happen? How could they go on? Doubt, fear, disbelief, anger. . . likely the same stages of grief we all feel at times of profound loss.

If you saw the news, read the headlines, signed onto Facebook, or read your church email then you already know something of the man, his accomplishments, and the broad scope of his witness in our community - Richard lived, laughed, and loved. . . And I was fortunate to be his Music Director and Friend.

"Jeff's trying to kill us!" Nathan recounted the story of a text from his dad. Evidently, it was not uncommon for Richard to snap a photo of an anthem we were learning in rehearsal and text it to Nathan: sometimes to inquire "Do you know this piece?". . . or "Look at this new anthem" . . . "Love it!" Or on occasion he'd send a picture of a challenging piece and proclaim, "He's trying to kill us!" and Nathan would send a reassuring text to his dad saying, "No, no. Learning a challenging tenor part won't kill you."

He loved to sing. . . and he loved to listen to great choral music.

Not long ago he sent me the Youtube clip of an anthem he had recently heard performed and had fallen in love with. "Do you think our choir could do it sometime?"

I liked the anthem and promised to order it and add it to our repertoire sometime during the next year. Chancel Choir - we have our work cut out for us - blame Richard.

Dappled Things - that's the anthem. A musical rendering of a Victorian poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins

GLORY be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

"Dappled" things. Unevenly spotted or colored. Unique.

"The poem is . . . a hymn of creation, praising God by praising the created world. It expresses the theological position that the great variety in the natural world is a testimony to the perfect unity of God and the infinitude of His creative power."

It finds beauty in "dappled things" . . . spotted, abnormally colored, or unique - reminding us of the beauty and diversity found in creation! Praise God, indeed.

Richard celebrated the infinite beauty of life. He embraced and embodied the diversity in himself and in everyone he met.

I knew the first time I met Richard that this was the beginning of a unique friendship. We shared similar paths. Our early faith formation shaped and

challenged our core values in both positive and negative ways. We understood each other and the journey it took to get where we are.

It's hard work suppressing your true identity in an effort to fit into the imposed societal norms that the church and culture dictated 30 years ago. . . There was a common bond of shared pain that we understood about each other:

There is an unspoken shame that you are taught to deny.

A reality you must never speak.

A dark place where no light should ever shine. . .

But glory be to God for Dappled things! What some see as an imperfection or blemish . . . God sees as a testimony to the perfect unity and infinitude of His creative power! We are called to celebrate the diversity of God's creation and Richard embodied that in our midst!

Resurrection comes in many forms: Marginalized individuals have always fought to overcome oppressive cultural and religious expectations, there are people in this room who have had to work hard to learn to love and accept themselves as children of God; to get to a place where they live lives of faith and integrity. Living into the fullness of who they are as God's children. Finding and living resurrection.

Richard found that new life . . . and not long after that, he found a church home where he could celebrate authentic renewal and unapologetic resurrection. One day he shared with me -- there was something he had wanted to do for a long time, he had given it much thought . . . and had finally decided that he was getting a tattoo. Not just any tattoo. . . this indelible mark had to be a symbolic representation of who he was. . . a testimony to his new life. . .

Richard chose the Phoenix . . . a lavish, multicolored, glorious Phoenix. . . the mythical creature that dies in a fire only to rise from the ashes. . . a symbol of resurrection and new life.

Friends, it's Easter. Scripture teaches us the lessons we need to know . . . and life reinforces those lessons we thought we knew.

We gather in sadness, fear, or disbelief --

and Resurrection appears and offers a word of Peace.

We do not comprehend what we see or experience -

--and Resurrection calls us to trust the mystery of new life

We bring our knowledge but cannot understand -

--and Resurrection gives us wisdom and calls us to action.

Friends, we have witnessed a lot this week.

-- and Resurrection calls upon us to be Witnesses.

Resurrection happens when we welcome those who are marginalized

Resurrection happens when we provide food, shelter, and safety

Resurrection happens when we help our neighbor,

when we stand up against injustice,

when we love those who are different from us.

There are signs of new life and resurrection all around us even as many of us still grieve. Look for those signs:

in the beauty of dappled things,

in the questions that plague us,

in the garden that feeds our community. . .

and yes, even in the empty spaces of our lives.

The empty tomb bears witness to our hope of resurrection. . .

There is an empty chair in the choir loft now that bears witness to the resurrection

. . . there is an un-occupied seat in the pew next to you, or in front of you, or behind you. . . that bears witness to the resurrection

. . . there may be an empty chair at your kitchen table or an empty space in your heart that bears witness to the resurrection.

As a resurrection people, let us respond in faith; Trusting God with our doubts, our questions, our lives, and our witness . . .

(move directly into "How Can I Keep From Singing?")