

# *Dead Rainbows*

*And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying,  
“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*  
(Luke 22:20)

A meditation by Siegfried S. Johnson on Maundy Thursday, **March 29, 2018**  
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It happened on one of our recent rainy March days. I arrived at the grocery store in Hot Springs just as the hard rain had slacked off, leaving a mere drizzle not even worthy of an umbrella. Stepping from my car I alertly side-stepped, reacting to a slippery looking spot on the pavement. Drops of rain had mixed with a puddle of oil, a blend creating a stationary spectrum of vivid purples, deep blues, bright greens, pale yellows.

I thought of something Eunice James wrote about her grandson's experience with a similar driveway prism. “*Grandma!*” he called as he rushed into the house, “*Come see the dead rainbow in the driveway!*”



I say, “*Nice job, kid! Thanks for the neat title for my Maundy Thursday meditation: Dead Rainbows.*” On my own I likely would have titled it “*Grounded Rainbows,*” or “*Asphalt Rainbows.*” *Dead Rainbows* is better.

Rainbows, you see, belong high, betoken hope. Spectacular, these parabolas painted sunlit against the sky’s scattering clouds.

Asphalt rainbows lying stagnant in a pool of grime simply lack inspiration. Far from lifting our eyes to the heavens, they hold our gaze earth-bound while calling for careful stepping to avoid a nasty fall.

On Palm Sunday the crowds had lifted their eyes to the skies to remember God's promise, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" The people had seen in Jesus a rainbow of messianic promise, the Son of David restored to the throne at long, long last.

But now, only a few days later, that rainbow of promise which had been at its zenith on Palm Sunday, is a *Dead Rainbow*. At the Passover meal, when Jesus spoke of his broken body and his shed blood, it must have been clear to the disciples that the rainbow had collapsed. After they sang a hymn and walked across the Kidron Valley to Gethsemane, that once high-arching rainbow became an olive oil slick on the pavement stones of Gethsemane (Gethsemane means "*olive press*"). One can imagine how the great drops of blood Jesus sweats mingled with the olive oil drippings from Gethsemane's presses.

The Christian's theme from the Gethsemane story is one of *Dead Rainbows*, and much side-stepping was about to begin. Even Jesus thought to side-step it, praying, "*If it be possible, Lord, take this cup away from me.*"

The high rainbow of political promise which Judas and others had hoped for was now a *Dead Rainbow*. Judas would have none of it, side-stepping that dead rainbow by betraying Jesus, possibly hoping his betrayal would force Jesus into a reactionary mode that would lift again to the sky the rainbow of political promise.

The shuffle of side-steppers begins. Annas. Caiaphas. Pilate. Herod. Back to Pilate. All side-stepping this *Dead Rainbow*. Pilate even comes to the point of publicly washing his hands of the affair after he unsuccessfully offers the Jews a way to side-step their intentions with the Barabbas Plan. They don't buy it, crying out "*Crucify him!*"

Even the disciples were side-stepping around the *Dead Rainbow* of messianic-hope. Arrested and escorted back across the Kidron Valley to the chief priest's house, a maiden's accusation is met with Peter's cursing denial. Jesus, led from his audience with Caiaphas, makes eye contact with Peter, and Peter averts his gaze in shame, a final side-stepping of this *Dead Rainbow*.

Rainbows are first mentioned in Genesis 9 as a sign of hope and promise, divinely placed in the sky as a covenant from God that he would never again cut off all flesh. "*When the bow is in the clouds I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh on the earth*" (9:16).

Do you remember any rainbows you've seen, perhaps bringing to mind a special moment, the sight of a rainbow that capped a moment with fresh splendor?

The rainbow foremost in my memory was at the Dead Sea, the lowest surface point on the face of the earth. I forget now which trip it was, but the moment I remember well. It was in March and we had left Jericho with drizzling rain, thirty minutes later arriving at Qumran, site of the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. The brief shower, unusual for the desert, had stopped. Walking out of the restaurant and gift shop at Qumran and looking back north toward Jericho, a vivid rainbow arched in the sky, stretching from Jericho eastward to the place where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. We marveled at this, a rainbow the Dead Sea! Not a *Dead Rainbow*, but a *Dead Sea Rainbow*.

That rainbows of hope can become *Dead Rainbows* is, of course, one of the key elements of the Holy Week story, that the high hopes of Palm Sunday, the splendor of Messianic promise, so soon “*bites the dust*.”

“*Bites the dust*” is how the psalmist saw it. Psalm 89 complains to God that a lofty rainbow of promise made to Israel -- that the dynasty of David would last forever -- had become a *Dead Rainbow*. Written after the collapse of the Davidic dynasty the psalmist complains to God. “*How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?*” (Psalm 89:46, 49). For the psalmist, God’s rainbow promise was now wallowing in the grime:

*You have renounced your covenant with your servant;  
you have defiled his crown in the dust . . .  
you have hurled his throne to the ground.*  
(Psalm 89:39, 44)

Closing, I want to share with you a tidbit of bible trivia concerning rainbows. Only three books of the Bible contain references to rainbows: Genesis, Ezekiel and Revelation. I hardly need point out that Genesis and Revelation are the first and last books of the Bible. Ezekiel is around the middle, a nicely symmetrical coincidence of concordance with symbolism oozing from that structural observation. As an arch has three points attracting visual interest -- the two bases and the apex -- rainbows are placed in the Bible in precisely that dynamic triad.

The first and last references to rainbows spanning the entire Bible, they serve as anchor points to our understanding of God’s covenant relationship with us. Logically, since *Genesis* means *Beginning*, one would think that the story of Genesis is the story of life. Revelation, situated at the very end, should tell of death. Genesis to Revelation. Alpha to Omega. Beginning to end. Thus, life to death. Right?

Wrong. (Isn’t it just like God, whose message so often reverses logic, asserting that the first shall be last and the last shall be first?) Genesis is death. Revelation is life. Genesis is tears. Revelation wipes away those tears. The beginning is the end. The end is the beginning.

The rainbow of Genesis is anchored in the earth. Dust to dust. The vibrant colors in the Garden of Eden, the promise of paradise, danced with color. Yet, it was a rainbow soon deflated, a *Dead Rainbow*.

In Revelation's biblical rainbow the moorings are no longer planted in the dust of earth, but firmly anchored in heaven. "*I looked and behold, a door stood open in heaven . . . and in heaven was a throne and one seated on the throne, and around the throne was a rainbow (iris) that looked like an emerald*" (Revelation 4:1, 3).

The Greek word translated rainbow is *iris*, a brightly colored circle. This is the parent of our word for the flower and, of course, for the colored part of the eye encircling the pupil. Revelation says that the vision was of a rainbow, an iris, "*encircling the throne.*" With the image of a rainbow, in a sense, one can imagine looking into the very eye of God, the encircling rainbow a window to heaven.

May this Holy Week be for you – even looking upon Maundy Thursday's *Dead Rainbow* -- a window to heaven.

