

### *Hallelujah!*

It is time for some *hallelujahs*, don't you think?

I'm sure you've noticed we haven't sung them in seven weeks.

"Alleluia," "Hallelujah," it's all the same thing... and it wouldn't be proper to shout *hallelujah* about such things as suffering and death and sin on which we reflected during Lent. It wouldn't be right.

But we're surely gotten off to a roaring start singing them today: *Jesus Christ is risen today, a-a-a-a-lleluia*. And of course: *the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our God...Hallelujah... King of kings and lord of Lords. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. Ha - lle - lu - jah.*

We all know what we came here this morning to celebrate – Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! That calls for a hallelujah.

What, exactly, are saying when we sing and say *hallelujah*?

Hallelujah is a composite word of two Hebrew words, *hallelu*, which is a verb meaning praise, and *Jah*, which is a proper noun, the first syllable of the name given for God in much of the Hebrew scriptures.

The word literally means *praise God!*

We're saying, early in the morning on the third day, they came to the tomb and found it empty, praise God!

Except in Mark's Gospel, it's not a straight line from *they found the tomb empty* to *Hallelujah, praise God!*

Mark didn't write it that way.

If you were following in your Bible at home this morning as I read the Gospel lesson, I'm sure you noticed that there are twelve verses that followed where we left off the reading. We ended at verse eight. The chapter goes to verse twenty. But if you look closely, you'll see double brackets around that material. That means that Mark didn't write it. It's part of the Bible, we should seek to understand it, but the overwhelming weight of scholarship tells us that Mark didn't write those verses.

This is not a new development in Biblical scholarship.

If you look in a very old copy of the King James Version of the Bible, you will find those twelve verses in the footnotes!

Folks have agreed for a very long time that Mark didn't write the longer ending.

Mark ended his version of the Gospel story with the words, "They went and told no one, for they were afraid."

That's sort of the opposite of *Hallelujah*.

It's not a very satisfying ending, is it?

The early church didn't think so either. Mark's ending didn't measure up to the standards that one expects from a risen Messiah. They didn't think it was adequate and so they "Disneyed" it up a little bit.

All things considered, they were really pretty restrained in what they added: A few snakes, some exorcisms, the ability to drink poison, and for just a touch of flair, a more proper ascension, to keep up with Matthew and Luke.

It's a little straighter line from a proper ascension into heaven to singing *hallelujah*, don't you think?

When there are angels and trumpets the *hallelujahs* just roll right off our tongues.

It's harder to get them started following *they went and told no one, for they were afraid*.

But, Mark is up to something. Mark is a masterful writer, and he wants to keep us hooked. And so just at the moment that an eager listener expects to hear Mark break into song over the resurrection, the narrative abruptly ends with a cliff-hanger.

It's not satisfying.

Once, a friend of mine duped me into watching the movie version of Evelyn Waugh's classic novel, A Handful Of Dust. It was a lovely movie about rich, beautiful people making each other absolutely miserable. It ends with the hero of the story, to the extent there was one, being abandoned in the jungles of Brazil, forced to read Charles Dickens to his captor while his cousins take over his fortune and his house. It was a tediously slow movie, and after the hours I invested in it, I felt *used*. This was *not* the way it was supposed to end!

I think that must have been how the early church felt. They'd invested hours listening to *Mark* and it just ends like that. No wonder they wanted to add a little light to it.

But Mark had a trick up his sleeve. He ends with those haunting words, *they told no one, for they were afraid*, and walked off the stage.

The curtain drops.

The audience is left to make something of it.

But I'm not sure that Mark is so much a *trickster* as he is a *gambler*.

He gambles that the audience is going to go home feeling a little unsettled, think about it, think about it some more, and then realize, "Wait... I know how this story ends. Somebody must have told it!"

*If you know the end of the story, it's because somebody said something.*

That's what Mark is up to with that cryptic ending – planting a seed in us so that we will go and tell someone. Mark wants the *Hallelujah* to come, not from *himself*, but from *us*.

But there's this thing about Hallelujahs. They don't mean much when they aren't sincere.

"Your printer is back on line."

Well Hallelujah.

"We believe we got it all. A short course of radiation and she'll be fine."

Hallelujah.

Hear the difference?

It makes a difference when we have something *real* to say “Praise God!” about.

Unless we’re spiritually tone-deaf, we know the difference when we hear it.

My friend Brian Blount takes on such tone-deaf *hallelujahs*:

“I don’t think a lot of hallelujah-hollering Christians fully understand what they are saying and doing, and therefore cannot comprehend the power they possess. In my mind, such uncomprehending hallelujahs can be broken hallelujahs... Hallelujah is about the majestic celebration and validation of power: Terrible, awesome, reality revolutionizing, world warping, cosmos-converting power.”<sup>1</sup>

Mark doesn’t end his gospel narrative with a triumphal declaration of power because he *knew* the only *hallelujah* worth singing is the one that addresses the oppressive powers that God overthrew in raising Jesus from the dead.

Mark doesn’t write his message for a self-satisfied, prosperous, comfortable, safe audience. I don’t mean that unkindly because that is what I am most of the time; it’s what I suspect most of us are, most of the time.

Mark wrote for an audience that knew that at any minute, the Roman government might upend their entire lives. They were poor. They were marginalized. They lived under an occupying army. They already *knew* what it was to have their existence upended.

They were definitely not satisfied, comfortable or prosperous.

When God raised this Jesus from the dead, it was a signal that God, not Rome, was in charge.

The resurrection says, “You may think that you’re in charge, Pilate. You may think, Rome, that you have the ultimate authority over life and death, but not so says God. Only God has ultimate authority over life and death.”

To the seemingly terrible *power* of Rome and all future empires, God says in Jesus Christ, “Only *I* am power. Only *I* wield the power that gives life.”

With the resurrection, God said to all the powers of oppression, “All you can do is destroy, but I have the power to raise to new life.”

That’s a different sort of *hallelujah*.

That is the *hallelujah* of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Dr. Blount continues,

“Our job is not just to sing hallelujah; our job is to *do* the acts of liberating and gracious justice that make others in the world want to sing hallelujah! Are there people struggling in our communities? Become their reason for singing hallelujah! Are there children being left behind in the educational system? Become their reason for singing hallelujah! Are there people hungry for food and desperate to feed their families? Become their reason for singing hallelujah! Are there communities ruined by the devastations of storm or neglect? Become their reason for singing Hallelujah! Are there people imprisoned by injustice, broken by oppression, haunted

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<sup>1</sup> Blount, Brian. *Broken Hallelujah*. Preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

by humiliation, left by society, struggling to catch up, knocked down by life, and trying to get up? Become their reason for singing hallelujah!”<sup>2</sup>

I don’t know if you know that we have a prayer group that meets every Sunday right after what would be our worship time, if we were in-person. We meet over the phone, and we pray for whatever comes in through the church website. Some days, it’s a grab bag of prayer requests. What they seem to have in common, though, is that the folks who offer them are looking for a reason to sing *hallelujah*.

People need a reason to sing *hallelujah*.

Sometimes my phone messages are a grab bag too. During our normal life, Sue could screen them a bit for me, but since we’ve been socially distancing in our office, they mostly go to my voicemail. The thing about voicemail is even though sometimes callers tend to ramble a bit, you have to listen all the way through to make sure that you’re not hanging up on someone calling to tell you about a member of the church. Well, the other day, I got one of those grab bag phone calls, and I listened to what I thought was going to be a tale of woe. But there was a twist. The caller said, “Dr. Mullis, I’m not calling to ask you for *anything*, you don’t even need to call me back, but I wonder if you might pray for me, and Dr. Mullis, I will be praying for you and your congregation.”

I played that voicemail over again.

I thought that I was going to hear another fine way to help someone else sing *hallelujah* and just like that, God’s redeeming, resurrecting power was turned back on me! I was the one being given the reason to sing *hallelujah*: Someone I’ve never met, probably won’t meet, was praying for you and for me during this difficult season.

That’s the sort of surprise ending that Mark is gambling on: That we’ll encounter the transforming, resurrecting power of God in our lives and that we will sing, say, and live our *Hallelujahs*.

I don’t have to tell you it’s been a hard winter. I can’t think of a time in my memory when we have more needed to encounter stories of redemption and hope, whether on social media, or by e-mail, or however. I still remember some of those old NBC news “Making a Difference” segments. They were stories of human beings at our best. I loved them. But the reason I bring the segments up is not to highlight any one in particular but to reflect on our need for them. We need to know that we matter. We all need to know it, *every single one of us*.

We need to know that someone cares, that someone is willing to make a difference in *our* lives.

That is the message of the cross and the resurrection: That we matter. We matter tremendously to God, who *is* making a difference in our lives.

Mark is gambling that we will realize the way we knew that the whole story couldn’t possibly end with the words, “They went and told no one for they were afraid.” He’s gambling that we realize that we came to know it because we mattered enough for someone to make a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

difference; for someone to tell us that we that we mattered enough to God to endure Good Friday so that Easter would come. Somebody wanted to make a difference in our lives and so the Gospel story is told.

Mark's a gambler for sure, but I can never decide if his ending is absolutely brilliant or patently stupid.

No PR person would ever *dream* of doing it that way.

The kingdom of God is subtle sometimes, but people getting up from the dead is not subtle. It seems a missed opportunity.

There have to be better ways of getting the word out, methinks, than gambling on us.

Nevertheless, Mark takes the gamble.

He's gambling that the Gospel has a word for today: A word for those experiencing unemployment, a word for those in poverty, a word for those struggling with addiction and mental illness. Mark is gambling that the Gospel even has a word to make a difference for the self-satisfied, comfortable and prosperous.

Mark is gambling that *we* have the word to pick up his ending, "They told no one for they were afraid."

Mark is gambling that we will sing *hallelujah*.

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. *Hallelujah!* He is king of kings and lord of Lords! *Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

*Ha-lle-lu-jah.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.