

## Hallelujah in Whatever Form

For many churches, there's a tradition to not say or sing the word, "Hallelujah" during Lent, the season leading up to Easter. The idea is that Lent is a time of solemnity. It's the time leading up to Jesus' death so we refrain from saying this word of exuberant praise and joy. Also, not saying it during Lent has a way of making the "Hallelujah" of Easter that much more joyful.

Think of the "Hallelujah" chorus, a song of ecstasy, a song that expresses our confidence in the hope of Jesus' resurrection.

But what if you don't share that same confidence? What if you can't quite sing the "Hallelujah" chorus with conviction?

Easter is typically our most attended church service of the year. My guess is that there are any number of reasons why you chose to come to church this morning. Some of you are here because you come almost every week. Some of you are here because the story of Jesus' resurrection gives you incredible hope. Some of you may be here because a family member wanted you to be here. Some of you may be here out of curiosity, wondering what is this whole faith thing really about anyway. Some of you may be here because life has been so hard and you are looking for something that you can hope in or at least a community to support you.

And before I say anything else, please hear me when I say this – whatever your reason for being here, you are so welcome. This is a place for you if believe every word of this story, this is the place for you if you struggle to believe any of it, and this is the place for you if you find yourself somewhere in between certainty and unbelief.

In our denomination, the UCC, we have a saying that is basically our mantra, "No matter who you are or where you find yourself on life's journey, you are welcome here." That is true every Sunday but it's especially true today.

You see friends, there's another way to view that word, "Hallelujah." Instead of thinking of the Hallelujah chorus, think about the haunting words of Leonard Cohen's most famous song, "Hallelujah."

*Well people I've been here before  
I know this room and I've walked this floor  
You see I used to live alone before I knew ya  
And I've seen your flag on the marble arch  
But listen love, love is not some kind of victory march, no  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah*

I actually think this version of “Hallelujah” is a closer interpretation to the story of Jesus’ resurrection we read about in the gospel of Mark. Mark was the earliest gospel written, probably in the late 60 years after Jesus. And it also was written during a scary time, an uncertain time. Tensions between Jerusalem and Rome had become intense and rumor was that the Romans needed to make an example of Jerusalem, like so many other empires had done before. The people were living in constant fear that Rome would crush them, and I think Mark’s telling of the resurrection reflects that fear and uncertainty.

Mark ends his gospel by saying the women “fled” the tomb—not left, but fled—in terror and amazement. Mark’s gospel offers the story more as a possibility of hope, a possibility of resurrection rather than a certainty. In fact, later editors were so concerned with Mark leaving the hope of the resurrection more of a question than a certainty that they decided to add on to it so in your Bibles you will see alternative endings of Mark. But the original version ends with the women fleeing the empty tomb in “terror and amazement.” Mark doesn’t feel the need to tie up the mystery and uncertainty of the resurrection with a neat little bow. Mark’s story is not the “Hallelujah Chorus,” but is more the cold and broken hallelujah of Leonard Cohen’s song.

That’s a stark contrast to John’s gospel, the last gospel written. John has by far the most detailed stories of Jesus’ resurrection and of all the different ways he appears to Mary and the disciples. And John is the most certain of the victory of resurrection. In fact, John is so certain of Jesus’ victory over death and evil that he tells us the ending at the very beginning of his gospel, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” He tells us again right before Jesus’ arrest and execution as Jesus tells the disciples, “Take heart, I have overcome the world.” And in the first resurrection story, Mary does not leave in terror and amazement, but instead runs directly to the disciples and shouts, “I have seen the Lord.”

But the difference in John’s certainty and Mark’s mystery was not based on the external circumstances improving by the time John wrote. In fact, by the time John was written, the very worst fears of Mark’s community had been realized. Shortly after Mark was written, Rome laid siege to Jerusalem, broken through its walls, and destroyed both the city and the temple. Beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, by the time John was written, Christians had been scattered all over the world fleeing persecution, they had created an underground network of churches, and they had been crucified, fed to lions, and tortured.

In Mark, the writer and those in his community feared that the worst might happen. In John, the worst had already happened and was continuing to happen. And yet, while Mark offers us the cold and broken “Hallelujah,” John is singing the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Jesus is risen!

Jesus has overcome!

We have life!

Somehow, the community that the gospel of John came out of found that the hope of the resurrection was so strong that it sustained them even when the unimaginable was happening. And I think that is, to a large degree, the hope that we dare to proclaim nearly 2000 years later. The hope of Easter is a defiant hope that dares to believe that no matter how bad things in the world may be, love will still have the last word. The power of Easter is not primarily about believing that one individual came back from the dead a long time ago. Rather, the hope of Easter is that somehow death, violence, pandemics, war, white supremacy, fascism, hunger, abuse, and any other cause of suffering in this world can and will be overcome because the same God that raised Jesus from the dead is also our God.

But even this hope is accompanied by doubt because a quick glimpse of the world so often seems to reveal the opposite. We live in a world where it often seems like love doesn't win, where the poor often don't find good news, where violence and oppression seem stronger than peace and justice. Can we trust the story of Jesus' resurrection with our hope?

Many faithful Christians throughout the years have wrestled with that very question. One of those was Mother Theresa. After Mother Theresa's death, her letters and journals were examined and many were surprised to find that Mother Theresa, this person almost universally recognized as a saint, spent much of her life doubting God, doubting herself and her faith. In fact, in one letter she wrote to a spiritual director, she stated that she felt her faith was dead. And yet, what did Mother Theresa do in the midst of her doubt? She took care of orphans and nursed lepers. She fed the hungry and clothed the naked. Mother Theresa did not have to always be certain of the resurrection in order to live by the resurrection. Her doubts simply meant she was human. Her faith caused her to continue to live by the resurrection even when she had trouble believing in the resurrection.

So friends, if your faith convinces you beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, you're in good company. Paul and the other followers of Jesus were so convinced. But if you find yourself overcome by doubt, guess what, you're also in good company. Mother Theresa and so many other "giants" of our faith also found themselves in that place.

You see, both the gospel of Mark with its uncertain ending and the gospel of John with its confidence in Jesus' resurrection are both part of our Scripture, both are a part of our faith story. And to me that's such good news. You see, the Christian faith is big enough for it to be your story if you are like John and certain you know what all this means and it's also big enough to be your story if you're like Mark and have no idea what it all means. This morning, what I want you to know more than anything, is that the story of Easter can be your story in whatever place you find yourself.

If your Hallelujah is that of the Hallelujah chorus and you are overjoyed with the hope of resurrection, this is your day. Jesus is risen. Praise be to God. But also, if your Hallelujah is a cold and broken one. If you are not certain that Jesus actually rose from the dead and are only tentatively wading in the water exploring what this whole resurrection thing means, this is also your day.

When Leonard Cohen wrote the song “Hallelujah” it took him 3 years to write it, and there were times when he was so overwhelmed with the words that were coming to him that he was literally driven to his knees weeping. Perhaps that is the very embodiment of the message of his song. His last verse goes like this:

*And even though it all went wrong  
I'll stand right here before the Lord of song  
With nothing, nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah*

Friends the hope of Easter isn't dependent on us having it all figured out. It is not the hope of certainty. It is not the hope that everything will be easy. Rather it is the hope, that in the midst of despair, in the midst of pain, and, in the midst of doubt, in the midst of it all going wrong – we can still find new life; we can still bring new life, we can still offer our own “Hallelujah.”

Even if it's a cold and broken Hallelujah, it's a Hallelujah nonetheless.

After all, the resurrected body of Jesus was a wounded body. He still had the scars from his crucifixion and the holes from the nails.

Friends, the resurrection gives us hope, but it doesn't remove our scars. The resurrection gives us a story to claim, but it doesn't erase our doubts.

So please hear this invitation on this Easter Sunday, who ever you are or wherever you are on life's journey, the hope of Easter is for you. So let your “Hallelujah's” ring out in whatever form they take.

Hallelujah.

Amen.