

Alleluia
Easter Sunday
April 5, 2015
Gordon Wiersma

Text: John 20:1-18

Listen to this:

CHOIR: Hallelujah Chorus

Thank you choir! Now listen to this:

ANDREW: Leonard Cohen ~ Alleluia

Thank you Andrew!

Those are 2 quite different Alleluias from the choir and Andrew - and I'd like to let those different-sounding Alleluias bounce around and settle in you for a bit, and then we'll come back to them.

If you're around Hope Church for the Lent and Easter seasons you soon find that around here we put some focused attention on Alleluia; you got a sense of that during the word with the children ☺ I've come to really enjoy the practice of hiding away the Alleluias during Lent, which we then bring back abundantly on Easter Day. And in fact I've come to find the practice not only enjoyable – as 'Hmm-hm-hm-hmm' is a nice little community joke at Hope Church (Jubilate Choir used "Wat-er-mel-on" as an excellent Alleluia substitute when rehearsing Easter music!) – enjoyable, but also meaningful - I find that it is a kind of 'giving-something-up-for-Lent' experience which helps me to reflect on and appreciate the significance of Alleluia. Unfortunately, one side-effect of the practice is that it makes me into a bit of a judgmental liturgical snob! – I was at a Holland Classis meeting in March (Classis is the leadership gathering of our local Reformed congregations) and during the worship service, there was a song with, brace yourself, (alleluia!) in it – I know, I was horrified to! – can you imagine the impropriety of it all?! So of course I sanctimoniously hummed "hm-hm-hm-hm" and looked around condescendingly at the far less-righteous people around me. But, I try to overcome that sense of superiority, since I realize that's not really the point - so let me get back to the meaningful part: there is certainly something in putting Alleluia for a season away that I think gives some anticipation and deepened joy as we pick it back up on this Easter Day. But, I have also found in this particular season that as I've thought

about voicing Alleluia again, I've wondered about what it sounds like to say it, to give voice to Alleluia at all – in our worship, in our lives, in our world. And to get at something of what I mean by that, let's look again together at that Easter story we heard from the Gospel of John.

The storyline in John starts with the quiet Easter dawn we might first hold as an image of the story – early in the day, still dark, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb; but once she sees that the stone has been rolled away from the cave-like tomb, there is immediately a frenetic energy to the story: Mary RUNS to Simon Peter and John – “they have taken the Lord from the tomb!”; Peter and John RUN to the tomb – John RUNS fastest! – John gets to the tomb, Peter RUNS into the tomb – and they see that it is empty. And then it slows down again – the disciples go back home; Mary Magdalene is back at the tomb again – and now she is weeping; weeping for grief and confusion and despair. Weeping, as she notices angels in the tomb – “why are you weeping?” – “because my Lord is dead and his body has been taken”; weeping, as she notices who she assumes to be a gardener now there at the tomb too: “why are you weeping?” – “because my Lord is dead and his body has been taken”. Jesus says: “Mary” – Mary says “Rabbouni”. It is a remarkable moment – Mary hears and recognizes the Risen Lord - which is simply the remarkable story of Easter Day then and now.

But here's the question I want to ask with you: when Mary Magdalene said to Jesus, ‘Rabbouni – Teacher’ – in that moment did it sound more like the Hallelujah chorus, or like the Hallelujah song Andrew played? and maybe even more important, which one did it FEEL more like to Mary? Well, the way the Gospel story reads to me, is that in Mary's voice there is present much of the feeling we heard in that Alleluia that Andrew sang. I do not hear Mary saying “Teacher!” with triumph and bravado; I hear her saying “Teacher” in a way that sounds perhaps most like a sigh of relief – Jesus, her Lord, who was dead, is alive; “Teacher” said with a disbelief that opens up everything she can now believe again; “Teacher” said in a way that carries in it all her weeping even as her heart is filled with joy. That it seems to me is the emotional landscape in this story– Mary is encountered by the Risen Lord and her heart can breathe again – it is a poignant kind of joy that we are invited to witness even as we give our own sigh of relief: Alleluia.

I love the Hallelujah chorus! – I love hearing it, and singing it; I love the feel of it – the glory and joy and strength; this sermon has nothing to say against ‘Alleluia’ in full voice and at full throttle - I want to make that clear. But I asked Andrew to sing that other Alleluia, because I think there is something important to hear there also – something plaintive, something yearning, and something very much joyful and strong in its own way too, present in that Alleluia. I want us to hear that because such are the tones present in that story of Mary and Jesus; and because I think that kind of Alleluia is an essential and meaningful part of our spiritual song on this Easter Day.

I love the Hallelujah chorus! But if that is our only Easter vocabulary, then I wonder: how does that really sound as we look at and speak to our world? This is a broken world – there is a lot of bad stuff happening – that is all too clear to all of us; sometimes it seems to me like a more broken world than ever, careening out of control – or sometimes it just seems to be the same old script of discord and injustice finding ever-new characters to play the parts. I wonder how we say ALLELUIA to such a world? – and not have it sound like we are just trying to deny or drown out the reality around us? not have it be a triumphal note that is really a hollow sounding victory at best? I look at my own life, and people around me: there are places of brokenness; places of burden and need; of challenge and uncertainty; of loss and struggle. What does Alleluia sound like there? - how does it speak to, gather up, hold within it those broken places in our lives and world?

I think what we find in this Easter story, is that in such a broken world as ours we are sought out by the voice of our Risen Lord – a voice of life, of grace; a presence of hope and peace. And in our world and lives, recognizing the Risen Lord sounds often like this: “Teacher” – it is the relief and wonder that our God is with us and among us. The resurrection of Jesus is the revelation of a different story to claim our lives and world – to those who weep in a broken world it is a poignant ‘Alleluia’ that renews in us the persistence and insistence of life, of mercy, of blessing, of joy given by the Spirit of Christ, by the God of life at work in our world. It is recognizing the Lord of life among us – ‘Teacher’ - ‘Alleluia’.

What does that kind of ‘Alleluia’ look like, feel like, sound like in our world and lives?

These are the kinds of things that I notice – and perhaps you will recognize the sound and feel of such encounters with the Risen Lord among us:

- I go to visit my Dad, recovering in a facility where he requires an incredible amount of care and he is perhaps not always the easiest to care for, and there I witness a staff person treat my Dad with incredible grace and dignity and tenderness – and my heart says “Alleluia” – “Teacher”

- I go with the 8th-9th grade GIFT class to Detroit to visit Nardin Park Church, a Reformed Church congregation located in the midst of all the brokenness and despair and possibility that is Detroit. And we find there people of deep faith and hospitality and wisdom; we are welcomed into worship of vibrant joy and faithfulness; we are witness to ministry of love and service to the community. And my heart says “alleluia” – the Teacher is present there – resurrection is at work.

- I follow the work of the Haiti Foundation Against Poverty as Hope Church folks recently helped with renovations for the school and orphanage that HFAP runs. In the midst of deep brokenness, people of faith are bringing true life – and I hear a poignant, joyful, persistent “alleluia”.

- I hear a speaker at Hope College describe communities in Africa that have experienced terrible violence and division, who are now doing the hard work of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration; communities coming together around hope and blessing rather than despair and fear. And I hear a quiet “alleluia” – “Teacher” – the Risen Lord present with a true life that is stronger than death.

I tell you, this kind of Alleluia gets inside me and it becomes a song of the simple and profound rhythm and presence of true life: I feel a Spring day; I see a child hug a parent; I see one of our teens support a family who has lost their teen to suicide; I am blessed by one of the elder saints of Hope Church; I see a family welcome a child who needs a home; I am told by someone in the hospital to give thanks for the gift of a new day; I have a friend tell me not to be so cynical; I hear a couple speak of their tender love for one another; someone smiles to me encouragement. And I hear in my heart – ‘Alleluia’, as I recognize my Risen Lord, my Teacher, present – revealing to me resurrection; and calling me to be a witness to life.

None of this minimizes or denies the brokenness with its own insidious persistence and power; but what it does is receive something else too – something more. To those who know and feel the brokenness, comes the sound of a voice calling our name, a voice we recognize: “Teacher” – and our hearts can say “Alleulia”. It is the call and sound and song that claims us and our world for life – that insists we are created from and for love – that persists with peace and hope as the true power of life. I love the Hallelujah chorus and all the loud Alleluias of this day and of our lives. And I also love the quiet Alleluia to carry with me – to hear and see around me – to share somehow in my life; for you to receive and share in yours. It is the deep and joyful “alleluia” that knows the Risen Lord is present – recognizing his voice, our Teacher – the one who reveals to us and our world the story of resurrection life, so grand and glorious, and that often sounds like this: ‘Teacher’ – ‘Alleluia’ AMEN