

### *A Whispered Alleluia*

“I remember when I was growing up”, writes Brian Blount, “And when the minister was speaking, especially at one of those hot, humid, summer-night revivals, people would talk back all during the sermon. And I thought I noticed a pattern. Whenever the minister was speaking against something that wasn’t something our church was involved in, when he was speaking about people that didn’t appear to be our church’s people, when he was speaking against the abuses and neglect of the governments which certainly did not involve anyone in the church, then I’d hear these loud affirmations. ‘Preach! Preach! Preach!’ They’d shout it out from the pews. They’d stand up and shout it from the aisles. But when the preacher turned, when his focus shifted to what he knew about our church, when he started stepping on rather tender, present toes, then the loud cries to the pulpit shifted as well. Then people were saying things like, ‘Watch out, now’ or ‘Help him, Lord!’ and no doubt a few were thinking, ‘Shut him up, Lord!’”<sup>1</sup>

I suspect the Gospel writer Mark can relate to that last sentiment, given all the folks who insisted on adding onto his Gospel narrative. Mark ended his gospel exactly as he intended, “They went and told no one for they were afraid,”

The Greek grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of the additional material doesn’t match the rest of Mark’s Gospel narrative. It is as different as Chaucer’s English is from ours. If you find an old King James version of the Bible, a very old translation, you will find that even then, much of the additional material that comprises the last twelve verses of Mark is relegated to the footnotes, and even our modern translations all make some sort of break between what happens before verse eight, and what comes later.

Scholars generally agree that Mark intended to end there, and closer examination of the rest of Mark’s version of the story almost begs for that dark and difficult ending, “They told no one for they were afraid.”

It is not so much a shout as it is a whisper.

Mark’s audience likely wouldn’t have accepted any sort of Disney-fied ending. Living in an occupied land, at the mercy of their oppressors, their temple either under siege or else sacked and desecrated, Mark’s community’s *alleluias* were likely not so much shouted as they were *whispered*.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Blount and Gary Charles, [Preaching Mark in Two Voices](#) (Louisville, W/JKP, p268)

Half of Mark's Gospel is about *suffering*, and Jesus is very clear about what following him entails.

At the start, as Jesus wanders around the Galilean countryside, gathering his followers, calling his disciples, healing, teaching, preaching about the kingdom of God, all the while, he is upfront and clear with his followers that following him was to be a potentially costly endeavor.

Then, when Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, it begins to become clear to everyone that the trip is about to get really hard. Resistance to his kingdom message builds, and it begins becoming clear what the ultimate result of his preaching and teaching will be. On the road to Jerusalem, the interactions between Jesus and the powerful began to turn hostile and bitter.

It is then that Jesus begins predicting his death. Three times he tells his followers that the Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Three times, he muses, "If I keep this up, it is going to get me killed."

Every time, the disciples push back. "No, Jesus," they say, "It won't be so, it *can't* be so."

It is as though the disciples have fallen so much in Jesus' thrall that they cannot imagine that others could not be. It is as though following him is so consuming that, though they do not understand it all, they cannot imagine an existence where Jesus will be handed over to be crucified.

The disciples don't come off too well in Mark. They wander around after Jesus, following, but not understanding. They are loyal, to be sure, but apparently not too bright. Jesus performs signs and miracles and wonders, and even in light of it all, the disciples have to ask who he is that he can do such things.

Yet, even though *they* do not seem to get it, there *are* no-name people, sometimes persons of faith, sometimes not, who cut through the confusion and see who Jesus is.

Mark's Gospel shows Jesus working his way toward Jerusalem, knowing all the way that his ministry will end on a Roman cross. The disciples, the ones closest to him, either obtusely refuse to believe, or else are incapable of seeing what the result of Jesus' kingdom message will be.

It is the people on the *outside* who see who Jesus is and tell the others about him.

Finally, in great frustration with the disciples' inability to see what is plain, Jesus makes the prediction that cuts them to the quick, "You will all fall away."

And they do.

First Peter, then the other disciples, fall away from Jesus in fear of what discipleship will demand from them. Peter, the rock of the church, denies Christ, not one or twice, but *three* times.

It is only the women who follow Jesus all the way to the cross.

When, finally, the women depart the garden and tell no one, the falling away is complete.

Mark's ending, though disturbing, is consistent with the picture of Jesus that he has painted throughout his Gospel, precisely *because* it feels so incomplete.

No wonder Mark's alleluias seem whispered, not shouted.

Mark, the master storyteller, wants to elicit a response from us, and these tacked on endings are spoiling his plans. Considering what was appended, he might surely reply, "Shut them up, Lord!"

Is it any wonder that, later on, Christians heard the ending and were unsatisfied with it?

They wanted us to know there is more to the story.

In that sense, they are doing *exactly* what Mark wanted them to do.

Mark's gospel ends with a *whispered* alleluia because Mark wants us to write the ending ourselves, in our own lives, with our own telling. "Shut them up, Lord," perhaps, but only so his abrupt ending will force us to draw our own conclusions.

"They went away and told no one, for they were afraid."

*That can't be how it ends!*

We *know* that isn't how it *really* ends!

We know it because *we* heard the story somewhere, somehow.

Yes, Mark's gospel ends with a provocative *whispered* alleluia.

Easter generally isn't a subtle day in the life of the church. Oftentimes, our alleluias shake the rafters and rattle the pews.

It is meet and right so to do.

*But alleluias don't have to be loud to be true.*

The women told no one, that's what it says, but perhaps we wonder if in their silence, their hearts were whispering Alleluia?

And if their hearts were whispering *alleluia*, surely the story must have escaped?

Alleluia, hallelujah, however we say it, it means the same thing. It is a composite Hebrew word: Allelu, *praise*, Ya, *God*, or *the Lord*.

It doesn't have to be very loud to carry its full meaning.

Sometimes a whispered alleluia tells the whole story better than all the shouting possibly can.

I remember well waiting at the hospital for the birth of a close friend's first child. After we waited what seemed like an interminably long time, my friend came down the hall, where we

were all gathered: His family, her family, great-grandmother waiting, my brother, there were probably thirty of us huddled out in the hall, aunts and uncles, both surrogate and blood relations, and he stopped next to my brother and smiled, and I'll never forget what he said, "Everything went well, she's beautiful, just beautiful. There's just one small thing..."

He leaned against the wall, and exhaled, and we all struggled to come up with a word, any word, to reply.

Quickly, the grandmothers rallied they headed down to the nursery with him, to meet his daughter. Finally, one young woman broke our silence, "Could we pray for this family?"

Her prayer was simple.

The words themselves were not important; the prayer was a *whispered alleluia*.

As we stood in the hall holding hands, she claimed God's promises for our friends and for us all who struggled to find the right words.

Our alleluias don't have to be loud to be true.

Mark wants us to finish the story.

He wants us to tell the truth, to say it any way we can: *Alleluia, he is risen*.

*Alleluia, praise the Lord!*

The God we are praising is in the business of bringing justice and righteousness.

Raising Jesus from death wasn't accidental, it is the ultimate expression of justice and righteousness from God who would settle for nothing less. How else can we make sense of God's redemption of a broken body nailed to the cross than to know God raised Jesus from the dead?

Mark whispers *alleluia* to the broken places of life.

Christians ought not believe God breaks us down in order to bring us up, but rather God our redeemer brings us up when we are broken down.

Just as God did with Jesus, God has *always* promised to redeem those who rely upon God.

Alleluia, hallelujah, however we say it, loudly or in a whisper, it always comes back to God's justice and righteousness.

I wonder, though, if we hear the whispered alleluias?

A whispered alleluia coming from hostages or refugees scatters the easy assumptions we may make about Israel and Gaza.

A whispered alleluia coming from our own city, from places of soul-crushing poverty and intractable gun-violence may silence glib proclamations about what needs to happen.

A whispered alleluia from people whose very identity has been hijacked into a talking point to make a point, and score a point, may call back to humanity the ones doing the talking.

And the compound effect of whispered alleluias is that they become a chorus proclaiming a message of hope and redemption to a world that desperately needs to hear it, and in fact, perhaps hears it best from places we wouldn't expect.

Certainly, that is what Mark intends to happen.

Whether our alleluias are whispered or shouted, they join the chorus that proclaims the good news that no matter how darkly the story seems to have turned, God will always be God, God is always good, death is no more, he is risen!

He is risen, indeed.

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