

Her mother replied that she must have imagined it.
Diana was too scared to say a word.

“But the odd occurrences didn’t stop,” she writes. “My grandmother insisted that the figure kept showing up in her bedroom. Little things went missing from the house. And, when she went to open the storage room in the basement, a fine yellow dust had evenly settled like an otherworldly snow on every box and every tool...No one could explain any of it.”

It took another two decades for Diana Butler Bass to gather her courage and speak about what she had seen on that Easter weekend after her grandfather died.

When it comes to Easter, she writes:

“Being afraid is much more normal than shouting alleluia.”¹

I think the Gospel writer Luke would agree.

Today is the third Sunday of Easter, and our story this morning is...a ghost story.

Well, not really a ghost story. It’s just that when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples, according to Luke, they didn’t shout Alleluia!

“They were startled and terrified,” Luke writes, “and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”

And it’s not just Luke who describes the disciples this way.
Afraid. Uncertain.
Filled with doubt.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, “The Were Afraid,” on Substack, March 31, 2024.

The other Gospels do it too.

Gospel of Mark:

“So they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Gospel of Matthew:

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Being afraid...

**being uncertain, being filled with doubt after Easter—
is much more normal than shouting alleluia.**

I think all the Gospel writers would agree.

Do you agree?

Have you ever been filled with doubt, in the days after Easter?

Do not misunderstand. In asking that, I’m not trying to dampen the beauty of this morning. The wonderful musical offerings that all our choirs are presenting today.

You’ve read the Harbinger, I trust.

What’s the theme for this Music Sunday?

Shades of Hallelujah.

Not bright, shiny Hallelujah...but shades.

As Marlon puts it in his cover, “the pieces for today’s Music Ministry Sunday reflect the many seasons of our lives and say ‘Hallelujah’ regardless.”

It reminds me of a short phrase that a colleague shared with me many years ago.

Maybe you’ve heard it before.

It’s only two words, but it’s packed with theological punch.

The phrase is this:

Alleluia anyway!

Have you ever heard that phrase before?

Have you ever said or sung or lived those words?

Alleluia anyway! is a way of saying that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of faith. It’s a way of saying that whatever fears or uncertainty we harbor, we don’t have to defeat them...in order to move forward with them.

The great theologian Karl Barth once described Easter joy as a “defiant nevertheless...”

He was talking about **Alleluia anyway!**

Or maybe you recall the great prophet Habbakuk?

I’m sure you were busy reading your Habbakuk last night...but just in case you need a reminder:

Chapter 3:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vine...

though...the fields yield no food;

though the flock is cut off from the fold...

yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will exalt in the God of my salvation.”

Barth knew...Habbakuk knew...about **Alleluia anyway!**

Do you know about this little Easter phrase?

It's not as popular as *Christ is risen!*

But it's got a potent punch.

It's a way of saying that what happens to us in this life will not be the final word about our lives. It's a way of saying that no matter what valley you're walking through, no matter what distance you feel—from your faith or your family or your church or your God—God will see you through...

I want you to practice it right now.

On the count of three, say it with me:

Alleluia anyway!

Good.

Now when I go like this [extend arm to congregation], I need you to say those two words.

You can shout those words.

Or you can whisper those words.

Have you ever heard someone whisper...Alleluia anyway?

Three years ago on Easter, I mentioned a Ukrainian pastor named Fyodor Raychynets. It was right after Russia invaded Ukraine. At that time, Raychynets was scared of losing his humanity. Now...three years later, he's scared of losing his hope.

What happens when you hope for things to improve, and they don't improve? When hope behaves not like something solid and permanent...but more like a ghost?

Here today. Gone tomorrow.

Raychynets was interviewed a few weeks ago.
He says it's tempting, living in Ukraine, to wait for the better day.

The day when the war stops, the day when it makes sense to have hope, to plan for the future. How can you plan for the future when a Russian bomb could destroy your future?

But what Raychynets has learned in 3 years of war...is that there is no better day.

If you want to love someone, do it today.
If you need to forgive someone, do it today.²

This pastor who lost his wife right before the war started, lost his son shortly after the war began, and you know what I heard him whispering, amidst it all?

Allelulia anyway!

Now...as I trust you are already aware, our church's music ministry, from its leaders to its youngest participants, is among the finest that you or I might will ever find in church...and one of the best parts about this ministry is that it is not offered to glorify the singers through our music...the point of the music is to glorify the living God.

² Fyodor Raychynets interview with Evan Rosa, on the podcast "For the Life of the World," at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, March 13, 2025.

Speaking of the choir glorifying God in music, how many of you were here on Easter Sunday, and heard that marvelous “Hallelujah” chorus sung by the Sanctuary Choir?

Did you know—I just learned this—that Handel’s “Messiah”—which is where the “Hallelujah” chorus comes from—that it didn’t originate with Handel?

I had no idea.

It had its origins years earlier, in the mind and heart of a wealthy, 18th century individual named Charles Jennens.

According to one historian, “Jennens was, by his own reckoning, ‘puny.’ He was so afraid of the cold that he lay under six blankets in winter and four in summer. He never married...and made distant enemies more readily than close friends.

His “outlook...was a ledger of worries.”
He suffered from what we would now call chronic depression.

But Jennens was friends with Handel. And amidst all his dreariness, one day something moved Jennens to sit down and start copying “quotations from the sacred scriptures, some from the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets, some from [the] New Testament...He linked one passage with another, editing and rearranging them, tying them together in themes that leaped out to him from the text...an archaeology of ancient promises, dug up and dusted off for the present.”

He was trying to write himself out of his despair.
According to the historian Charles King:

“Committing his ideas to paper would end up being the most enduring act of Charles Jennen’s life...”

Because it just so happened that Handel needed new material at the time, and with his musical gifts, he was able to turn Jennen’s scribblings and ideas about scripture into what we know now as Handel’s “Messiah.”³

Which is why you’re able to experience the wonder of the “Hallelujah” chorus on Easter morning!

In other words, there is no “Hallelujah” chorus without this least likely person, Charles Jennens. This fearful and puny person who looked at his life and the world around him in the 18th century, a world wrought by poverty and cruelty and wars, and instead of saying, “I give up,” you know what he said?

Alleluia anyway!

That’s right.
So how about you?

When God takes your faith,
with all your doubts and fears,
and the ghosts from your past...

And God mixes it with two little words—
Alleluia anyway!—
who knows?

Who knows what God will do with you?

(Amen.)

³ This story comes from two sources, both by Charles King: “Two Men Wrote ‘Messiah.’ You Know One of Them.” in *The New York Times*, December 25, 2024, and “Every Valley: The Desperate Lives and Troubled Times That Made Handel’s Messiah,” New York: Doubleday, 2024.