INTRODUCTION

It’s hard for us to imagine today, but, in 1942, a young lady by the name of Dorothy was kicked out of her Ohio high school because she had gotten married, and that was against school rules. Dorothy had tried to keep her new marital status a secret, so she could finish her senior year. But, after her husband left for his military service, the news leaked out, and Dorothy was expelled from school a few weeks before she could graduate. While this turn of events was sad, it probably wouldn’t have come to my attention, except for the fact that something remarkable occurred in March.

After a lifetime of hearing her mother say, “The stupidest thing I ever did was not finish high school,” Dorothy’s daughter Jan decided to do something special for her mother’s 93rd birthday. Jan sent a letter to the Akron (Ohio) Public Schools, asking if they would award her mother a diploma. Daughter Jan wrote, “I believe that my mother deserves to receive her high school diploma [because] . . . she mentors so many neighborhood children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, always pressing them to stay in school and complete their education, [and] then go on to college.”

After considering Dorothy’s merits as a “lifelong learner,” the school district agreed. When the family gathered to celebrate Dorothy’s birthday, the school superintendent brought the diploma to her home, and one of Dorothy’s children pulled a black graduation cap from a box and placed it on her head. On her 93rd birthday, Dorothy finally got the desire of her heart. “I feel like I’m 18 again and just graduated,” said Dorothy. “I didn’t get to walk across the gym, but I get to have” my diploma. With the advocacy of her daughter and the cooperation of the school authorities, Dorothy was able, finally, to rise to the occasion she had missed all those years before.¹
On Easter Sunday, I started a sermon series based on Bible stories that happen “on the third day.” Right away, we saw that “the third day” doesn’t necessarily mean a literal 24-hours-times-three. In the story of Easter morning, we heard the message that “on the third day” meant that, after suffering terribly, Jesus rose again and so can we. Last Sunday, we read about two disciples walking to Emmaus later on Easter day. In that story, we saw that—after walking and talking, studying scripture, and breaking bread—the disciples realized that, on the third day, Jesus is with us. Today, we turn to the Old Testament story of Queen Esther, where we see that “on the third day” means “rising to the occasion.”

1—AN OPPORTUNITY WAS PRESENTED

We see this meaning of rising to the occasion, first of all, because an opportunity was presented. Sometimes “opportunity” means something really positive. But, often, an opportunity begins with a problem. That was the case here in the story of Esther, which took place after the Babylonian Exile, and after the Persians had taken power over a very large region. In this short story that reads like a melodrama, King Ahasuerus ruled over a variety of people and religions. A problem developed when the king’s number one official Haman made a decree that all other officials and servants must bow down to him. A Jewish servant by the name of Mordecai, who happened to be Queen Esther’s close relative, refused to bow down to Haman. Realizing that the faithful Jewish practice of worshiping-God-alone was going to conflict with his purposes, Haman then plotted to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom. Learning of this pending genocide, Mordecai called upon Queen Esther to rise to the occasion and save her people.

An opportunity was definitely thrust upon Esther. It wasn’t something she was looking for. But Mordecai was persuasive in his presentation. He advised Esther that she couldn’t hide behind her crown. Even inside the palace, Esther’s Jewish heritage would be discovered, and she would perish. Mordecai reasoned that perhaps Esther had “come into royal dignity for just such a time as this.”
As we look at our own lives, we can think of times when an opportunity was presented to us. Maybe it wasn’t an opportunity we wanted. We would have been much happier to go along with our life the way it was. We certainly were busy enough. We certainly were already carrying enough responsibility. We certainly had enough handicaps and self-doubts to keep us in our place. But there it was: a situation that needed attention, a problem that needed solved, a difficulty thrust upon us.

Because the opportunity usually begins with a problem, it’s easy to be pessimistic. It’s easy to think there are no solutions. It’s easy to be depressed, and accept that this is just the way it has to be. It’s easy to think that there’s no way that the third day can be any better than the first or the second—especially if the third day is long in coming. But that kind of fateful thinking fails to see that every problem is an opportunity waiting to be addressed.

There’s that saying that “necessity is the mother of invention.” The opportunities presented to us usually come in the form of a challenge or conundrum. At the very least, they often reveal conflicts of interest. What do we value most? Whom do we value most? Will we deny ourselves now in order to gain a better future? The anxiety caused by those hard choices is often enough for us to close our eyes and refuse to see the opportunity presented to us. But, as this “third day” story of Esther spells out, if we’re going to rise to the occasion, then we have to begin by admitting that—even in the darkest, most painful, most intractable situations—we have, in fact, been presented with an opportunity.

2—ACT UPON THAT OPPORTUNITY

Once we acknowledge that we’ve been presented with an opportunity, then, of course, we’re called to act upon that opportunity. After Mordecai’s impassioned plea, Esther responded by asking all the Jews to fast. While the word isn’t there, the implication is that she also asked them to pray. Esther and her maids would do likewise. Then Esther would go before the king. Even though it would be against the law for her present herself without the king’s prior invitation, and even though she risked
being put to death, Esther decided that she would try. As Esther 5:1 tells us, “on the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, opposite the king’s hall.”

If you’re familiar with this story, you know that it turns out well. Esther was smart enough to know that the way to the king’s heart was through his stomach. Only after she had fed him two banquets did she tell him the problem of Haman’s plot to destroy all the Jews. I’m sure the reason this story was saved and collected into the Jewish scriptures was that it had a happy ending for them. But the happy ending only occurred because Esther rose to the occasion of what she should do by acting on that opportunity.

Yes, I know there are times when it’s best to say, “No.” There are times when we already have enough on our plate and can’t manage anything else—or at least not manage it very well. There are times when we should step out of the way and let someone else rise to the occasion. There are absolutely times when we have to stop and say, “Enough already!” If we tried to solve all the problems of the world, we’d go nuts. After all, we’re not God.

But, yes, we do have a responsibility to carry our share of the load. And like Uncle Ben said to Peter Parker in the Spiderman movie, “with great power comes great responsibility.” Compared to people in the rest of the world, we who live here in the United States of America have tremendous power. We have financial resources. We have free speech. We have the right to assemble. We have the right to vote. We have the right to worship. When we work up our courage, we can do tremendous things. If you still don’t think we have great power, then I challenge you to consider that, even with a little power comes a little responsibility. When an opportunity presents itself to us, sure, we may need the first day to get past the shock, and we may need the second day to get it all figured out and put a plan in place. But, on the third day, rising to the occasion means acting on the opportunity.
CONCLUSION

Every time I read the Book of Esther, I think of a woman named Georgia Harkness. I think of Georgia because the title of her biography, *Such a Time as This,* is taken from Esther 4:14, where Mordecai says, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” But, actually, the biographer used that title because Georgia Harkness herself had used that title for an article she wrote in 1940. Just as Methodist women were organizing the Women’s Society of Christian Service, Harkness challenged those women “to assume a more active role” in *all* levels of the church. Georgia had long been an advocate for women’s ordination. Because of her diligent and decades-long work on that cause, Harkness was given a standing ovation at the Methodist General Conference in 1956, when women’s ordination was finally approved. The great Methodist woman “also achieved high acclaim as a theologian,” teaching at two colleges and two theological seminaries, and writing numerous books, articles, speeches, and sermons. Harkness was also a social activist, challenging the church to overcome many of the hurtful “isms” of the 20th century. Because of her great work, Georgia Harkness was named as one of the ten “most influential living Methodists” in 1947 and “Churchwoman of the Year” in 1958.

We have a song in our hymnal that was written by Georgia Harkness. The fourth verse ends with the words, “take thou our lives, and use them as thou wilt.” Women like Georgia Harkness and Queen Esther dedicated themselves to God’s call in their lives. If we join them in stepping up in such a time as this, then we will surely see an opportunity presented that we can and should act upon. We will see that, while the good that needs to be accomplished may be decades in the making, it is possible, on the third day—if we have been rising to the occasion.

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1This story is a mixture of paraphrase and quotation from Sarah Larimer, *The Washington Post,* in *Standard Examiner,* “93-year-old finally gets high school diploma” (March 16, 2016), p. 1-2C.