

SERMON SERIES: "Opening the Way"
SERMON TITLE: "God's Grand Opening"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 1, 2018 (Easter), at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A few nights ago, when I was watching the local news, one of the stories was about a new coffee shop that had just opened up in Park City on March 3. *Lucky Ones Coffee* is a Starbucks-style restaurant that employs disabled people. Some of their workers have Downs Syndrome. One employee featured in that news story had a condition that affected the left half of her body differently than the right half. She said she can work for a while, and then she needs to take a rest break. She said her boss doesn't mind that because everyone there has some kind of challenge.

When I looked up the *Lucky Ones Coffee* shop online, I found their mission statement which says, "We want to create fulfilling jobs for individuals with disabilities [by] promoting acceptance, independence, [and] inspiration, as well as community inclusion." I've never been a coffee drinker, and I rarely ever go to Park City. But that news story made me want to drive up there just so I could support their cause. I'd like to contribute to the successful *grand opening* of a business that gives opportunities and new life to those who are differently abled.

Grand opening—maybe that's how it was for the earliest disciples on that first Easter morning. As the women approached Jesus' tomb, they were sad and grieving. They were crippled by fears and uncertainty. They were experiencing a crisis of faith. The Gospel of John tells us that the male disciples were so disabled by Jesus' crucifixion that they were shut-in behind locked doors. The kingdom of God they had dreamed about had been crucified with Jesus on the cross and sealed off by a huge stone. Yet, in spite of all that closing down of future hope, the women who dared to venture out discovered surprising good news. As they approached the tomb on that first Easter morning, the women's hearts

were cheered. Not only had God raised Jesus from the dead, but the tomb was opened wide so the women could see what had happened.

On this Easter morning in 2018, I invite you to think with me about what God's grand opening meant for those first disciples and what it means for us today.

1—OPENING WAS AN ACT OF GOD

First of all, the grand opening of Jesus' tomb was an act of God. In the previous chapter, Matthew tells us that Joseph of Arimathea had retrieved Jesus' body from the cross. Joseph had wrapped Jesus in a clean cloth and placed him in a new tomb that Joseph had cut from the rock. Then Joseph had rolled a big stone in front of the entrance of the tomb. The actor who closed that part of the story was Joseph. But, here in Matthew 28, the actor who opened up the tomb was God. Each one of the four gospels tells the story of Easter a little differently, but Matthew makes it clear that God was the one in control. With an earthquake and an angel, God rolled back the stone, opening up the way for the women to believe in God's power of resurrection.

Last September, I was in Mexico on a Spanish immersion trip when the first in a long series of earthquakes struck there. The shaking woke us up, but since it happened during our last night there, and we were scheduled to leave early the next morning, we arrived home safely before we heard many reports. Later, we learned that the house of one of our Spanish teachers had sustained cracks in the walls. In the aftershocks and quakes that followed, many other houses and public buildings were damaged and destroyed. All total, nearly 400 people died, and thousands were injured.

Knowing the trauma that earthquakes can cause, we might wonder about crediting God with earthquake power. Shaking the earth violently enough to move bedrocks and tombstones isn't something we usually consider to be happy, peace-loving, life-affirming, God-like behavior. And the people of Jesus' day probably didn't see good in earthquakes very often either. But the story of Easter is the surprising good news that God can take any adverse event, any terrible situation, any unjust

sacrifice—even the death of God’s own Son—and turn it into something amazing and wonderful. To say that God was acting in the earthquake is a sound bite way of expressing the statement of faith that, even in the violence and hardship of an earthquake, God is present and working to turn sorrow into joy, hurt into healing, and death into life.

I like the additional detail about God acting through an angel to move away the stone because it reminds us that God might act through us sometimes to roll stones away. God might need us to be the angels who will help others see the empty tomb and find resurrection faith. After earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, forest fires, accidents, sickness, and death, God acts to open the tomb of death and raise up life. Whether God uses an angel that looks as bright as lightning and snow—*or* relief agencies, doctors, church offerings, volunteer laborers, and compassionate neighbors—the act is no less miraculous or divine. God uses many hands to accomplish **God’s** act of grand opening.

2—OPENING OVERCOMES GREAT OBSTACLES

A second learning from Matthew’s resurrection story is that God’s grand opening overcomes great obstacles. Matthew 27 tells us that, after Joseph of Arimathea had carefully placed Jesus’ body in the tomb and closed it with the large stone, the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate to request security. To appease them, Pilate ordered that Jesus’ tomb be sealed and guarded, so that no one could steal Jesus’ body and claim that he had risen from the dead.

With all that security, it would have been impossible for any **human** to have gotten Jesus’ body out of there. And yet, **God** made it happen. I’m sure God could have raised Jesus from the dead without anyone even knowing about it. But part of the miracle of Easter is that God also opened up the tomb so the women could see that Jesus was gone and believe that he had been raised. In spite of all that formidable opposition, God was able to give the women a means of hope.

What that means for us today is that God is able to overcome great obstacles in our lives too. When we think that there’s no solution to our problems, God has a way to overcome them. When we’re

sure that we've come to the end of the road, and all options are cut off, God shows us an opening.

When we've closed ourselves off from people and opportunities for fear of being hurt again, God is able to lovingly pry open our hearts and allow us to live once more.

I've spoken before about the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that happened to me after being in two car accidents in one week. That horrible experience of December 1982 left me quite damaged. For months, I'd cry every time I got into a car. I was just certain that someone was going to hit me again. I only ever was able to drive again because my husband started refusing to take me places. I worked up my courage by repeating a little mantra: "Most people are good drivers most of the time. Most people are good drivers most of the time." Eventually, I regained most of my peace of mind.

But then, one year I had to take my church youth group on a mission trip, and I was going to have to drive. The anticipation of that responsibility caused me to begin having nightmares of car crashes all over again. I suppose that could have paralyzed me. But my call to ministry was stronger than my fears of driving. So I prayed that God would help me, and I went forward in faith, believing that I was doing God's work, and therefore God had to empower me to do the job.

And God did. We all survived the mission trip. And through that success, and decades of relatively safe driving since, God has pushed this impediment out of my way. Yes, I can still be a little jumpy—especially if I'm the passenger and not the driver. But, speaking from my own experience, I truly believe that God's grand opening overcomes great obstacles.

3—OPENING SPREADS FAITH IN JESUS

A third learning from Matthew's Easter story is that God's grand opening spreads faith in Jesus. Had he never risen from the dead, eventually, Jesus would have been forgotten. Time and history would have moved on. But because God raised Jesus from the dead and displayed that fact in such a grand opening event, Jesus' followers were convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. They were so convinced, in fact, that they spread that good news far and wide.

It's interesting to see the progression of that faith in Jesus. In Matthew's Easter story, the women ran and told the other disciples what they had found. In First Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul wrote that Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to more than 500 people all at the same time, then to James and all the apostles, and last of all to Paul himself, who carried the message of Jesus all around the Mediterranean. In Acts 10, we are told that the resurrected Jesus was seen by witnesses God had chosen. Those witnesses shared their faith with other Jews. Then, finally, the disciples realized that God was opening up faith *even* to the *Gentiles*.

God started it all by the grand opening of Jesus' tomb, but the grand opening became even grander as it advanced from person to person and community to community and nation to nation. Today, we know that God's grand opening has multiplied faith across centuries and millennia. Far beyond what any of the original disciples could have ever dreamed, God has spread faith in Jesus as the hope of salvation for people of every conceivable type.

What does that mean for us? It means that God is still opening the way of faith to new people in new places, and we have a role to play in sharing our faith story. How has faith in Jesus helped you? How has God acted in your experience to overcome obstacles and give you new life? Let's all think how we can assist in opening hearts, minds, and doors so that even more people can find strength for today and hope for eternity. Let's play our part in God's grand opening, which spreads faith in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

On Sunday, April 22, we'll have a special celebration here at First United Methodist Church. We'll celebrate the tenth anniversary of the first grand opening worship service in this new building. Our congregation's history goes all the way back to 1870, when the first Methodist preacher held a service at the Union Depot train station. Over the years, the congregation worshiped in several different buildings. The most recent one was in downtown Ogden at 26th and Jefferson. But the time came when

the congregation decided to allow God to resurrect the church in this new place. And so, here we are, 10 years later.

If we can remember or imagine what an act of God it took for our congregation to make that move, then multiply that miracle times millions, maybe we can just barely begin to imagine what happened on that first Easter morning. We need that kind of power and possibility in our lives today. We need a God who acts to overcome obstacles and spread faith. And so I urge you: Let's never forget and never stop telling the story of God's grand opening.