

SERMON TITLE: "Opening the Way: God's Grand Opening"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 4, 2021 (Easter) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I live on the east bench above Harrison Blvd. Just a few blocks down the hill from our house is Horace Mann Elementary. That school, which was constructed in 1954, will be torn down at the end of the academic year. The old building, with its leaky roof, has served generations of students and is now ready to be put to rest. But death will not have the final say at that location just east of 9th and Harrison. On the same property, R & O Construction Company is raising up a much-taller and more-colorful East Ridge Elementary. Instead of a leaky roof, the new school will have solar panels on top. The East Ridge building, which is larger and will be able to educate more children, is scheduled to open before the 2021 school year begins. If COVID-19 doesn't prevent it, I'm hoping the administration will host some kind of grand opening to let the public see what the school will be like for the next generation of students.

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. Their teacher and Lord had been killed. His body was dead. The women were crippled by fears and uncertainty. They were experiencing a crisis of faith. The kingdom of God that they had dreamed about had been crucified with Jesus on the cross and sealed by a huge stone. The future they wanted was closed off and shut down. Yet, the women who took their burial spices to the tomb that morning 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 had been opened wide so the women could see what had happened.

On this Easter morning in 2021, I invite you to think with me about this story from Matthew 28. Let's consider what God's grand opening meant for those first disciples and what it means for us today.

1—GRAND 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.

Do you remember our Utah earthquake last spring? There were aftershocks, but the main tremblor happened early in the morning of March 18th. I was at home, eating breakfast, when I heard the noise and felt the rumble. The first thought that went through my mind was a Hill Air Force Base exercise that came too close. But my mind shifted from that pretty fast. I had felt *my* first earthquake in Mexico in 2017, when nearly 400 people were killed, and I could tell what happened here was something like that. I was glad I was sitting down because everything felt like it was moving.

Fortunately, no one was killed by our Utah earthquake. But, coming right after the COVID pandemic had started, the shifting earth certainly felt ominous. I remember lots of us were asking if God were trying to get our attention. Personally, I don't usually like blaming God for bad things that happen like floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and bedrock-shaking violence. I prefer to think of God more as the peace-loving, life-affirming type. 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. God used the earthquake to open the tomb for the women. Even in the disorienting hardship of what might have been a natural disaster, God was present and working to turn sorrow into joy, hurt into healing, and death into life.

I like Matthew's 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, forest fires, tsunamis, and pandemics—after divorce, cancer, and job loss—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—GRAND 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 extra 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 so the women could believe that Jesus had been raised. In spite of all that formidable opposition, God was able to open the way for the women to find life and 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 feel like we're between a rock and a hard place, God is there creating a nurturing space.

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

In our Adult Sunday School class last week, we were reading about Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch Christian whose family helped hide Jews during the German invasion of Holland during World War 2. When the Nazis discovered what the ten Boom family had been doing, they arrested them. Corrie's father died in prison, and Corrie and her sister were both sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Corrie's sister died there from starvation and other cruelties. Corrie somehow survived and, after the war, she wrote books and became a famous speaker on the need to forgive. But, after one of her talks, when one of the former guards from Ravensbrück approached her to ask for her forgiveness, Corrie found it very difficult. By sheer will to obey God, she finally responded to his extended hand. And when she did, she felt God's "healing warmth flood [her] whole being, bringing tears to [her] eyes." Corrie ten Boom knew this feeling of forgiveness didn't come from herself. It was God's love and the power of the Holy Spirit moving through her,* opening up a blockage in her heart. Whatever our suffering, whatever our pain, God's grand opening overcomes great obstacles.

3—GRAND 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—which we read in our Call to Worship—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 “chosen by God.” 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 language and culture and 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 great 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 Thursday afternoon, I got the second dose of my COVID vaccination. I’m so happy so many of you have received yours too. It feels like such a wonderful relief! And, after a whole year of being shut out of our sanctuary, it’s an amazing and beautiful experience to be back in here on Palm Sunday and today. God may have used an earthquake and an angel to create the grand opening on that first Easter morning, but this year, God is moving the stone through the power of vaccinations and medical workers. God is opening the way from death to life. Let’s never forget, and let’s never stop telling, this incredible Easter story of God’s grand opening.

*From her book *Tramp for the Lord*, as quoted by Brian Zahnd, *UNconditional?* (Charisma House, A Strang Company: Lake Mary, FL, 2010), p. 33.