

SERMON TITLE: "Opening the Way: Open Doors of Faith"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 14:19-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 25, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I was the pastor of the Wesley United Methodist Church in Pueblo, Colorado, I had a poster taped onto the door of my office. The poster showed pictures of about a dozen doors. The old historic district in Pueblo was kind of like 25th Street is to Ogden, and the restaurateurs and store owners there were trying to promote their businesses. So they hired a printer to create a colorful poster that showed only the doors of their establishments. Some of the doors were brown, of course. Others were black, green, blue, or red. Some doors had fancy knobs and hardware. Other doors were unique because of the type or shape of their windows. Like a puzzle, the poster challenged its viewers to identify the businesses to which the doors belonged.

I liked that poster so much that I bought one and hung it on the door of my church office. It reminded me that the church also has doors—doors through which we invite and welcome people to our ministry and provide an opening to faith in Jesus Christ.

Open doors of faith is what I want to talk about this morning. All this month, we've been hearing about ways that God has opened up opportunities for faith development. God began opening the way with the grand opening of the tomb on Easter morning, so the women could see that Jesus' body was no longer there. Next, we learned about how the risen Christ opened the hearts of the disciples who walked along the Road to Emmaus. Then we read about Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem, and how Jesus used their physical senses and an explanation of the scriptures to open their minds to understanding.

All three of those stories took place on or near Easter Day. Today's scripture from Acts 14 happens much later, maybe 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, during the first missionary journey of the

Apostle Paul. As we consider these verses, let's see what the ministry of Paul and Barnabas can tell us about how we too might open doors of faith.

1—PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS

The first clue we see in this scripture passage is found in Acts 14:21. There we see that we open doors of faith when we proclaim the good news. As Paul and Barnabas traveled around the Mediterranean region, they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Acts 14 doesn't spell out the details of this good news message, but we see some clear content in Acts 13. In a sermon there, Paul explained that Jesus was condemned, killed, and laid in a tomb. That was the bad news part of the story. But God did not allow Jesus to waste away. Instead, God raised Jesus from the dead. And, after that, the resurrected Jesus appeared to many witnesses. Paul indicated that these actions fulfilled the words of the Jewish prophets. Paul also proclaimed to his audience that, where the Law of Moses had been powerless to forgive sins, it was now possible to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus. This proclamation of the good news opened doors of faith for many people, who believed and became Christian disciples.

Today, here at our church, we too are called to proclaim this good news of Jesus' resurrection. Through worship services and Sunday School lessons, through sermons and songs, through Christian fellowship, through mission projects around the world, and through our positive witness to our neighbors, we proclaim that injustice and death aren't the end of the story. We who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead are entrusted with a holy and powerful message that hope and healing are available in this life and in the life to come.

Resurrection wasn't just for Jesus. It's for all of us, as well. When we're overcome by the hardships of life and the guilt of sin, we can rejoice in the victory of God over all kinds of physical suffering and spiritual pain. And who doesn't need a good-news message like that? We members of First United Methodist Church can open doors of faith when we proclaim the good news.

2—STRENGTHEN AND ENCOURAGE THE DISCIPLES

A second way that we can open doors of faith is to strengthen and encourage the disciples. We see in Acts 14:22 that this was an important part of what Paul and Barnabas did. Paul and Barnabas were traveling missionaries. Most often, they preached a message and moved on, sometimes circling back to check up on their new converts to see how they were doing. Since they usually didn't stay long in one place, when they were there, they had to do what they could to build up those believers.

I'm sure this action of strengthening and encouraging the disciples included additional proclamation of the good news of forgiveness and resurrection life through Jesus. But verse 22 indicates that the nurturing of the new disciples also included a reality check about the many persecutions that would come before the kingdom of God would be fully realized. Missionaries Paul and Barnabas had to manage some expectations, so the new disciples would persevere and not give up. The gospel *is* good news. But, until we fully enter the kingdom of God, we'll also continue to experience some hardships.

This talk about suffering wasn't hypothetical, and it wasn't only felt by the new converts to Christianity. Paul and Barnabas themselves had a lot of personal experience with controversy and resistance. In Acts 14:19, when the missionaries were in the city of Lystra, they encountered some fierce opposition, and Paul was stoned to the point that his persecutors thought he was dead. Fortunately, after he was surrounded by other disciples, God miraculously raised him up to carry on with his ministry.

Strengthening and encouraging the disciples is essential for opening doors of faith. And that's why Acts 14:23 tells us that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church. These Christians who faced controversy, conflict, and hardship needed resident spiritual leaders—peers in the congregation—to help guide them when the missionaries weren't there. And that's why the appointment of spiritual leaders was done with prayer and fasting and trusting in the Lord. At every level of the church, it's important to have leaders who can understand and withstand the troubles that might come in a

community of believers. That wisdom and calm in the face of a storm doesn't happen by accident; it comes through the intentional and sometimes sacrificial practice of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and fasting. I would add to that the importance of worship, small groups for faith development, and personal Bible reading. We open the doors of faith when we have the spiritual wherewithal to strengthen and encourage the disciples.

3—KEEP REACHING OUT TO NEW PEOPLE

In addition to proclaiming good news and strengthening and encouraging the disciples, this text from Acts 14 offers a third suggestion of how we can open doors of faith. We can keep reaching out to new people. In just this one chapter of Acts 14, there are the names of nine different places the missionaries went: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Lycaonia and surrounding country, Antioch, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia. And verse 27 tells us that, when the Jewish people rejected the message of Paul and Barnabas, "God opened a door of faith for the Gentiles." In those early decades of Christianity, there was always a new group of people who hadn't yet heard the message.

Today, we often decry the decline of the church. Everywhere across America, less and less people attend worship and Sunday School. Consequently, less and less people know very much about the Christian faith and the Bible. Obviously, here in Utah, the majority of people are connected to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and there may be less unchurched people here than in other states. But even here, probably on every block of houses, there is someone or maybe several who don't participate in a faith community. Those people present us with a mission field of possibility.

When our congregation moved out here to Marriott-Slaterville from the old downtown location, there was the expectation that this northwestern suburb would fill in with lots of houses, and many people would come to our church. That hasn't happened as well as we would have liked. And this past year of COVID-19 restrictions has put an even greater damper on new visitors to our sanctuary. But, since we started livestreaming our worship service on Facebook, many new persons have visited us that

way. And, now that we've opened up our sanctuary, it's a great time to get the word out that we want people to come. Starting this next week, there will be no requirement to RSVP before coming to worship, so that might help us get new folks in the doors. Whether they live close to the church or in a neighboring city or county, or even in a state far away, we want everyone to know that they're welcome. So, it's up to all of us to keep making invitations and sharing our Facebook page. Whenever you encounter a person who has just moved to Utah, or someone who has had a major life change, or someone who seems open to engaging with a new faith community—in person or online—please share the good news of Jesus with them by inviting them to our church.

When I first went to seminary back in the early 1980s, we were taught that the way to grow a church was to build a faith community around people who were all alike, for example, white and middle class. But now, church growth experts are saying something different. A new longitudinal study has shown that, within the United Methodist denomination, at least, multiracial churches are the ones most likely to be growing and have higher attendance.* Diversity of all kinds is important. If we are going to open doors to faith, then we need to keep reaching out to new people.

CONCLUSION

About 20 years ago, when leaders of the United Methodist denomination came up with the slogan "Open hearts, open minds, open doors," they never dreamed that our churches would have to be closed for an entire year due to a pandemic. But now that our COVID restrictions are beginning to ease up, the slogan's message is all the more relevant and timely. If God could overcome Jesus' crucifixion and death by opening the tomb to resurrection life, and if those earliest Christians could overcome their grief and fears as God opened their hearts and minds and doors, then surely God can also open the way for Christian faith to thrive and grow today. Let's do our part by allowing God to open *our* hearts and *our* minds, so we truly can open doors of faith.

*<https://religionnews.com/2021/04/16/study-multiracial-methodist-churches-draw-and-keep-more-people-than-their-white-counterparts/>