Very early on the first day of the week.
The sun had barely risen above the horizon. But the three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, needed to get moving. For two reasons.

First, they could use the cover of semi-darkness for protection. After all, the Roman soldiers who had crucified Jesus and were now probably guarding Jesus’ tomb wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of any residual followers of his. It was much better, and a whole lot safer, for them to proceed with caution and remain in the shadows so that they could make a quick exit if they found it necessary to do so.

And second, they had an important job to do, and it had to be done sooner rather than later.

Jesus’ body needed to be anointed. That is, it needed to be treated with spices—which was the normal Jewish practice when someone died—in order to hide the odor of a decomposing corpse while nature did its thing and the lifeless body turned to dust.

Three days had already passed and that task hadn’t been accomplished, because Jesus had died right before the Sabbath began, and no work—such as preparing a body for burial—could be done on the Sabbath. So the preparation had to wait until now. Better late than never, the women thought. Jesus deserved a proper and righteous Jewish burial.

There were no men around to help them. Peter and the rest of the disciples were nowhere to be found. After Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death, they had all scattered like terrified sheep. God only knew where they were hiding out. But there was no time to track them down now. The preparation of Jesus’ body couldn’t wait any longer. So the two Marys and Salome made the decision to go to the tomb and do it themselves.

It didn’t occur to them until they were almost at the tomb that after Jesus’ body was placed in it, a massive, wheel-shaped stone had been rolled across the entrance to keep trespassers out. During their discussion, they sadly acknowledged to each other that even ten women—let alone just the three of them—wouldn’t be able to move that stone so they could get to
Jesus’ body.

But still they continued on to Jesus’ resting place. If nothing else they could offer a prayer and express their pain and sorrow over Jesus’ death. At least that would be some expression, some show of respect for the rabbi who had made such a tremendous positive impact on them.

With bowed heads they approached the tomb. This was going to be very difficult—maybe the most difficult thing they had ever done.

When they looked up, all three of the women’s mouths dropped open.

Mary, the mother of James, gasped and took a step back.

Salome’s legs grew unsteady and she fell to her knees on the rocky soil.

Mary Magdalene stood there silently, gazing intently at the sight.

The stone . . . that massive, heavy stone . . . had been pushed aside. Who could have possibly done that? Now the opening to Jesus’ tomb was exposed. Anyone, whether they had been his supporters or his enemies, was able to enter. They could waltz right in with no trouble at all. There was no longer anything there to stop them.

The three women’s first thought, of course, was that it was the work of grave robbers. That wasn’t unheard of. But why would anyone rob Jesus’ tomb? Nothing of value had been buried with him because he had owned nothing of value. So, what would be the point of breaking into his burial chamber?

The three women cautiously approached the grave. They entered it and looked around for any signs of disturbance. That’s when they saw the young man dressed in a bright white robe, sitting on the right side of the tomb. Who was he? A grave robber, caught in the act? A wandering beggar who had stumbled upon this accessible cave and went in to find shelter from the cold night air? One of the disciples? An angel?

“Don’t be afraid,” the young man said. “You’re looking for Jesus. I know where you can find him. He’s not in here. He’s out there. He has risen. I’m sitting right where they laid his body three days ago, but his tomb is now empty. He’s going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just like he told you.”

Traumatized and terrified, the three women fled from the tomb. They got out of there as fast as they could.

Of course they did. It makes perfect sense. It was a natural and totally expected reaction to such an event. Graves are supposed to remain undisturbed; and dead people are supposed to stay dead. A person’s first and immediate normal reaction to resurrection isn’t joy. It’s more likely to be terror. Or alarm. Or panic. Or trauma. Or dumbfoundedness. You
wouldn’t be happy, not at first. You wouldn’t rejoice, not right away. Rather, you would probably let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The women fled from the empty tomb. They ran away as fast as their legs could carry them. That was the very first reaction of the very first witnesses to the empty tomb on the very first Easter.

Yes, surely Mark’s gospel got that reaction right. Fear. Shock. Distress. No other kind of reaction would really make sense.

If a loved one of yours died and three days later you visited that loved one’s grave, only to find the grave had been opened, the body had disappeared, and a complete stranger was standing by it, telling you your loved one had risen and was going ahead of you to Scarborough, wouldn’t you flee?

Your darn-tootin I would. Start the car, Wilma. We’re outta here!

But we’re not afraid of Easter anymore, are we?

In truth, we’re scarcely even emotionally jolted by Easter. At least many of us aren’t.

Easter is about resurrection; it’s about God raising Jesus Christ from the dead, and the hope that we, too, will be raised immortal one day; and our reaction is often along the lines of, “What time are the reservations for dinner? I think I’ll get the prime rib this year.”

Or, “I hope Uncle Clyde can make it back to Maine for Easter. Last year he was still in Florida and we really missed him.”

Or, Alisha’s Easter dress and bonnet are so cute. And you should have seen her this morning, scooting around the yard looking for Easter eggs!”

Easter fear?

Hardly.

Easter apathy or indifference?

Possibly.

Easter boredom?

I don’t know. But I certainly hope not. Because if Easter bores us; if the idea of resurrection and Eternal life is of no interest or importance to us, it would probably be better if we simply didn’t celebrate Easter at all. It would be better if we decided that Christ being raised from the dead never happened, it was pure foolishness or wishful thinking or maybe even deception on the disciples’ part.

Yes, I think that to believe and not care is worse than not believing at all.\n
And I will be the first to admit, even as an ordained Christian minister and a man of faith, that Easter is hard to believe. It really is. Like I said
earlier, dead people are supposed to stay dead. The traditional Christian belief is that Jesus didn’t; that somehow, in some mysterious way, by some incredible miracle, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead after three days in the tomb, and walked the earth and appeared to his disciples and many others, and even today Christ lives and is present and active in our lives and in the world through the Holy Spirit.

Hard to believe?
You bet.

And yet, here we are, 2000 years later, still proclaiming that Jesus is alive. What could have happened back then, three days after Jesus’ crucifixion, to make his followers believe that Jesus was resurrected?

What happened that transformed Jesus’ disciples from terrified, cowardly individuals who were hiding from the authorities to save their own skins, into bold witnesses who went out into the world proclaiming that Jesus Christ lives and is the Lord, and who, in most cases, paid the ultimate price for their witness to the risen Christ by being put to death?

What happened that caused a tiny, fledgling group of persecuted believers who claimed Jesus was raised from the dead and was the Messiah to grow and survive and thrive, and now, this very day, there are more than two billion Christians in the world?

What happened to make that happen?
Something happened.
And not just “something” with a small “s.”
Something big had to have happened. Something major.
Something remarkable.
Something incredible.
Something unbelievable.
Something powerful enough to make people run . . . first, away from the empty tomb, and then, later, towards it.

Those three women we read about, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, were scared out of their wits on the first Easter morning. They ran away. They kept their mouths shut, and didn’t tell anybody what they saw or experienced at Jesus’ tomb.

Their lips were sealed.
At least at first.

But their fear and silence didn’t last forever. Maybe it was days later; or maybe it was weeks or even months, who knows.

But those women at Jesus’ tomb didn’t stay quiet for the rest of their lives. Because something happened. Something inexplicable. Something unbelievable. Something terrifying at first, but then, something incredible.
Something amazing. Something that would bring excitement to hopeless hearts and joy to heavy hearts.

Something happened.

And that’s why we’re here this morning. To think about what happened on that first Easter, to reflect on it, pray about it, and to ask ourselves how that something that happened in Palestine 2000 years ago affects our lives today.

Will we run away from it?
Will we keep our mouths shut about it?
Will we be apathetic about it or get bored by it?
Will we dismiss it or reject it as false?

I don’t know. We each get to decide what to think and how we will respond to the Easter claim that Christ is risen. And our thoughts and responses will be as unique and distinctive as we ourselves are.

But however we respond, we can’t deny that something happened on that first Easter—something that rocked the world of Jesus’ disciples and shook it to its very core. Something they were even willing to die for.

Yes, something did happen. That’s for sure.

And whatever it was that happened, it was significant enough that we simply have to do something more than simply nothing. Amen.