The women had come to pay their respects, to weep for a friend, to finish a funeral. That was the plan, anyway. Custom and tradition helped in a time like this. When everything had been disrupted and you were feeling kicked in the gut and disoriented, it helped to have something specific to do, something tried and true and concrete to fall back on. So like their mothers and grandmothers had done before them, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others had prepared and packed up the spices for anointing a body and had set off in the chill and damp of early morning to do the only thing they knew to do in a time like this.

It would not be the first time, of course, that someone had gotten up in the morning to do the thing they thought they were going to do only to discover that they needed to rethink their day, that their plans had been changed for them, that they were going to wind up on a road they had not intended to travel, a path that maybe they did not know even existed.

The same sort of thing had happened to some fishermen, or so the story went. They had shaken off sleep and sore backs and arthritic hands and had headed down to the lakeshore to do what they always did, and what their fathers and grandfathers had done before them, day after day, season after season. But no sooner had they loaded the boats with their nets and water and lunches did a stranger appear -- and everything changed. He spoke a word -- “follow me” -- and against their better judgment and the confused looks of their neighbors they did just that. For three years they followed, fishing for people, and healing them and feeding them and rolling back entrenched stones so that a new world could be born where joy and justice were possible.

And then there was the story about the tax collector who had trudged off to his office one day with his usual mixed feelings. No one ever greeted him in the street or bought him a drink after work and some of the neighborhood kids even called him names and ran or threw rocks at him because their parents had said he was no good. Truth be told, he didn’t much like himself, but he had kids of his own to feed, and at least this was a job, even if his employer was the enemy. But then there came that day when the same stranger who had changed the fishermen’s plans showed up and changed his own. He had left his counting books behind and followed. And it had been wonderful. Not only was his family cared for, but it was so good to give life back to people and to look in their eyes and see connection instead of contempt.

And speaking of people who had been lonely and hurting, there was that woman that everyone whispered about, the woman who only went to draw water from the town well in the heat of the day because that was the only time she could avoid the looks and the gossip. She too had planned to do what she did most every day, but on that particular day, the stranger was already sitting at the well. And -- well, you know the story. He asked for a drink but gave her a voice and she broke her silence with more good news
than anyone in her city had heard ever imagined.

Or what about all the hungry and hurting people who got up assuming that they were going to be hungry and hurting that day too -- only to find themselves as honored guests at an all-you-can-eat fish fry? Only to find themselves walking and running on legs that had not been strong in years? Only to find their skin clean and their minds clear?

Yes, those women who had so carefully prepared the spices and planned to anoint Jesus’ body might have known that something was up, that someone was up. They might have known that the God they served and loved has a way of throwing out our carefully prepared agendas and rewriting the scripts we thought we were following. They might have remembered that this same God had promised to overcome the old world where the poor did not get to eat the food they had planted or live in the houses they had built; they might have remembered that God promised to “create new heavens and a new earth” where weeping is no more, where no one labors in vain, where the wolf and lamb feed together (Isaiah 65).

They might have remembered all that and not been so perplexed by the empty tomb. But the pain and grief of any given moment can make it so easy to forget the promises of a day when all will delight in the fullness of life. I’m pretty sure that’s why we need to get together at least once a week and tell the stories of God’s goodness and faithfulness to one another -- just as those bright, shining messengers told the women. After all, there are so many political and economic and even religious forces that want us to forget that God won’t let injustice and death have the last word. We need to get together to remember God’s relentless love, to remember that the living Lord is not relaxing here but is back out there, tirelessly creating his peaceable kingdom so that we can stop living in fear and start living in fellowship.

“He is not here,” said the messengers in that graveyard. He’s back on the road, changing plans and changing lives. Why just a few weeks ago, I heard from Nibs Stroupe, fellow Presbyterian in Decatur, about a time earlier in his life when he woke up planning to honor the tradition of his father and mother and do everything he could to make sure that schools and churches and restaurants remained racially segregated. And then one day a stranger with nail holes in his hands and feet encountered him and changed his plans. Now Nibs pastors one of the most racially integrated churches in the United States.

Or out in Kansas City a gang member woke up early one morning with plans to shoot a member of a rival gang. But a Bible study he had been reluctantly attending got inside his head and heart and he heard a stranger say you have to love your enemy. And so he turned in his gun and became a school teacher.

Or just this week all the papal security guards in Rome have been going beserk because Pope Francis isn’t following any of the old protocols, the old plans. Somewhere along the way he heard a story about a strange savior who washed the feet of his friends -- and he took that story seriously and decided to try it for himself. And so on Maundy...
Thursday he went to a juvenile detention center and washed the feet of twelve prisoners, including two women -- one of whom was Muslim. “But you’re not supposed to do that!” some have said. Apparently those critics had not yet heard the good news: Christ has risen! His love has been unleashed! There’s been a change of plans! Hallelujah! Amen.