

Billy Graham once responded to someone who shouted out "God is dead! God is dead!" Dr. Graham with tenderness replied, "That's strange because I just talked to Him in prayer a few minutes ago." Because of Easter, he is alive and always present to us.

The founder of no other religion has an empty tomb as Jesus has.

Today we celebrate the greatest of all Christian mysteries, the resurrection. It is a mystery infinitely more complex than anything we can know or reason.

Yet in this mystery one will discover a common denominator. The story of the resurrection is told in all four gospels. The Christmas story, by contrast, is found in but two gospels, Matthew and Luke. That, in itself, is a measure of the priority of Easter.

But let us look back to the quest for a deeper common denominator in the resurrection. In the individual gospels' accounts of Easter morning, the first witnesses to the empty tomb: were woman, with different combinations of women, depending upon the gospel one reads.

These variations are not contradictions, only differing partial recollections. None of the twelve apostles were included. Peter, James, and John, as well as the other apostles, learned of the resurrection through these women.

The good news of the resurrection, to be announced to the whole world, was told first to the women. They were also the first to witness to Christ's resurrection. (Wives can rib your husbands now.) Very appropriate, as these women never left him, in his Passion.

One of the most striking common denominator is Mary Magdalene. In all four gospels she is the first to the empty tomb. That had to be a surprise.

One might rightly expect Peter, the leader of the apostles, or perhaps John, the beloved disciple, or Mary, the mother of Christ. But the privilege of the being the first witness to the resurrection was given to Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene, of whom the gospel says, Christ cast out seven demons.

The tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute came from St. Gregory who identified her with the woman who washed the feet of Christ in Luke's gospel.

So Mary Magdalene is rightly called a sinner. She might have been a prostitute, which some find more dramatic, but that is not found in the gospels. The message of the risen Christ appearing first to Mary Magdalene is that the resurrection is proclaimed first to sinners.

Mary Magdalene embodies our Easter hope, because sin is our common denominator. We Christians are a greatly varied lot— young and old, rich and poor, male and female. She was the first to Easter faith. She is the hope for all of us who struggle with our sins, Christ will never leave us, for no one is beyond redemption.

There is one further item to identify the common denominator correctly. The official title for Mary Magdalene in the Catholic tradition is “Penitent.” She is not listed as a martyr, or an apostle. Mary Magdalene is a penitent. She was a sinner, but a penitent sinner. She repented of her sins.

Easter is joy for sinners, repentant sinners. Easter is new life offered to the penitent. Our repentance enriches our Easter joy. In the Gospels, Easter was revealed first to Mary Magdalene, the penitent. Today, Easter is celebrated primarily by sinners, but hopefully repentant sinners. That is the common denominator of the mystery of Easter.

Christ awakening from the tomb is also our awakening. His resurrection from the tomb is our resurrection from sin and its consequences. Other awakenings must precede our inner resurrection and prepare the way for it. This particular account testifies to the experience of those who know that the night of sin and doubt is nearly over. "The women found the stone rolled back from in front of the tomb." The stone represents the weight of sin and selfishness, which has buried the awareness of the presence of God up till now, but which has been rolled away.

The stone was rolled away from the door, not to permit Christ to come out, but to enable the faithful to go in. To people who faced the grave, as the end of everything, death as the final barrier to all human hopes, was now broken. To people who were never sure that their prayers really reached God, the way to the Father was now reopened.

Because of Easter, every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection. We shall see one another again, for death is no longer the final answer. He has risen!

Easter reminds us that every Good Friday in our lives will have an Easter Sunday and that Jesus will let us share the power of His Resurrection. Each time we continue to hope – even when our hope seems unanswered – we share in the power of Jesus’ Resurrection. He has risen!

In short, the message of Easter is that nothing can destroy us – not pain, sin, rejection nor death – because Christ has conquered all these, and we too can conquer them if we put our faith in Him.

In a world where so many people are looking for the way, searching for the truth, yearning for a significant life, we have Jesus, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life for everyone. He has risen! The Resurrection teaches us that beyond darkness there is light, beyond death there is life, and beyond sin is forgiveness...for he has risen.