

Each year at Easter when you look at how a church is decorated, you are struck by the white linens, the easter lilies and the symbolism of joy and hope. And that is highly appropriate because at Easter, we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord commemorating how He lives forever, and triumphs over death and sin.

But the thing of it is, Jesus is not like a genie in a lamp. The Resurrection does not eliminate sin in the world. It does not eliminate suffering. But what it does is remind us that these things do not have the last word. As we hear from the epistle on the Easter Vigil: “death no longer has power over him” and in the Gospel, the question from the men in dazzling garments, “why do you seek the living one among the dead?” Jesus has triumphed, but He invites us to follow Him into that triumph; into that liberation from sin. Saint Paul says it best: “think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus” and, from the Easter Sunday reading, we are to “clear out the old yeast so that you may become a fresh batch of dough.”

Sin is the old yeast. And a question for us to ask as we celebrate this day of victory, is do we want to remain imprisoned by sin and it’s effects, or do we want to be liberated?

Stephen Watt was for years a state trooper in Wyoming. And he has always been a Christian. But he found that when his life was nearly taken, bitterness took over. His would be killer went to prison. But so too did Stephen through bitterness and anger. It was then that he found his liberation through mercy.

In his own words:

“I shifted on the couch, searching for some way to sit without my legs and back aching. I’d lived—if that was even the word—with this constant pain for four years now. But that was only part of what was bothering me tonight. I sat for an hour, pen poised above a sheet of white notebook paper inside a binder. I needed to write this letter, wanted to believe it could make a difference. But the words wouldn’t come.

It was Marian, my wife, who had urged me to do this. “You can’t go on keeping this inside of you,” she told me. There was plenty I wanted to say. I wanted the slimeball who did this to me to know my agony. I wanted to tell

him what he'd taken from me—my job as a Wyoming state trooper, my self-worth, my very will to live.

But the worst was the anger, a raw, festering hatred that smoldered inside of me. If only I'd killed Mark Farnham when I'd had the chance. At least I'd have that satisfaction. So many times I'd asked God to take this burden from me. Instead, nearly every waking hour, and then at night in my dreams, I relived that day.

I was eating lunch at the Country Kitchen in Rock Springs, taking a break from working the fender benders occasioned by a March snow. I hadn't bothered wearing my bulletproof vest. I knew I'd be spending most of the day writing accident reports.

My radio crackled: bank robber in a tan vehicle possibly headed up Highway 430. I swallowed the last bite of my chiliburger, extra onions, left my money on the table and rushed out.

Just past milepost 13 I saw a car matching the description and pulled it over. I hit the mike to call dispatch with my badge number: “Rock Springs, 105, a tan Mercu—”

BOOM! A bullet pierced the windshield and tore into my eye. It felt like it was on fire. I opened my door for cover, only to slump onto the passenger seat, my service revolver underneath me. “Shots fired! Officer down,” I screamed into the radio. I looked up. There was a man standing over me. Mostly I saw the barrel of his pistol. He pumped four more bullets into me, then ran.

Somehow I lurched out of the cruiser and emptied my .357 Magnum into the back of his car as it sped away. Blood was everywhere. Stay calm, I told myself, lowering myself to the pavement. I’d never been one to pray, but now I begged God to look after me and Marian. We’d been married only six months. We were just kids in our twenties. Let her know I love her, I prayed. I felt as if I were drifting away from myself. Then the world went dark.

I woke the next morning in intensive care. My father was holding my hand, Marian next to him. They told me the doctors had removed my eye, part of my liver and most of my intestines. One of the bullets was lodged against my spine and couldn't be safely removed.

"It's a miracle you're alive, Stephen," Marian said.

At first that's how I saw it too. Two months later I was back on the force. A few bullets weren't gonna keep me down. I came from tough Wyoming stock. I could take care of myself. But inside something was wrong.

Something I didn't know how to fix. Patrolling filled me with dread. My hands trembled when I pulled someone over. I'd never known such fear. It was overwhelming.

And so was the physical pain. I took pain pills to get through the day. At night I drank beer until I fell asleep. That's when the night terrors would come: blood raining down on me. Every night I woke screaming and crying, Marian holding me. "I'm right here," she'd say. "It's going to be okay." But I knew better.

Four months after he'd left me for dead on that highway, I sat in a courtroom and watched that bank robber, Mark Farnham, plead guilty to attempted second-degree murder in exchange for a life sentence. I started shaking with rage. A life sentence! Wasn't that what he had given me? He deserved to die for what he'd done! One of my shots had hit him in the shoulder. If only I'd had more time to aim...

One evening I pulled over a motorist for speeding. I went to the car and asked for his license. He reached behind him and I was sure I saw a .44 Magnum in his hand. I drew my weapon. "Get out of the car," I ordered, my revolver inches from his head. I looked again. Not a gun, a wallet. He'd simply done what I'd ordered him to do.

That was it. I went on disability. I wasn't up to being a cop, physically or mentally. Day after day I hobbled around the house, mostly to get another beer from the fridge. What good was I to anyone like this? I started asking myself. Why hadn't God just let me die that day? I was desperately depressed. I met with the police chaplain. I told him about the anger and the pain and how hopeless my life seemed. "Have you forgiven Mark Farnham?" he asked.

Forgiven? He had to be kidding. Forgiveness wasn't even on the table. I could only hope that somehow Farnham was suffering as much as I was.

The chaplain's eyes searched mine. "I don't mean with words," he continued. "You need to forgive him in your heart. That's when you'll find the healing you're looking for."

That evening I told Marian the chaplain's advice. "Forgive that guy? Have you ever heard anything more ridiculous?" I said.

She looked at me for a long moment. "All I know is you've got to do something," she finally said. "This isn't getting any easier."

Then, out of the blue, Marian joined a church. "I want to meet some people," she said.

"I love you, Stephen, but we can't go through this alone." Every Sunday she would come home and tell me what the minister had said about God's love and the power of prayer. "I wish you'd come with me," she said. Why not? It's not like I had anything else to do. And I wanted to be with my wife.

It felt good to get out of the house. The congregation was welcoming. No funny looks at the man with the eye patch and the limp. I wanted to believe the minister when he said we could turn our cares over to God. But even me? Surely he meant people who hadn't been shot five times and had their future stripped away from them.

I went back, mainly for Marian. One Sunday she walked to the front to get baptized. I was stunned. I saw a change in her. She was stronger, more hopeful. "We're going to get through this," she told me so many nights. "God isn't through with you." So that Easter I got baptized too. It couldn't hurt, right? But by that afternoon my body was aching, my stomach still churning with emotions I couldn't handle.

One Sunday the minister preached on the redeeming power of forgiveness. "Don't do it for the other person. Do it for God, who forgives all men."

After church Marian asked me, "Do you think you'll ever be able to forgive Mark Farnham?"

“How can I,” I snapped, “when I always feel like this?”

But deep inside a feeling took hold, as if God himself had just thrown me a lifeline in that sermon. “What happened to you that day was a crime,” Marian said. “What’s happened to you since is a tragedy. God made sure those bullets didn’t kill you. But your anger is going to do what those bullets didn’t.”

She got me a binder, a piece of paper and a pen. “Put it in words,” she said. “Let it all go. Give it up to God. He’s the only one who can handle it.”

But what to say to Mark Farnham that I hadn’t already said a million times in my head—that I hated him and blamed him for everything that had gone wrong in my life. All at once I was back on that highway, bleeding, rolling on my back, asking God for help. But was I willing to accept it now when I needed it as much—no, even more—than that day I nearly died? Physically surviving was just the beginning. Now it was my spiritual survival that was in critical condition.

My pen poised above the paper, I felt the most incredible sensation, the anger leaving, a transfusion of... Dear Mark, I just want to share my joy with you, I wrote, the words coming fast. If you haven't already, won't you join me in Christ's love?

That was it. That was the secret! The way to defeat hate is with love. It was as if by extending a hand I'd loosened the grip inside me. My body hurt, but there was inner peace, a comfort in knowing God was still helping and had always been even in my darkest struggles.

I dropped my note in the mail. I didn't expect to hear anything back. That wasn't the point. The world seemed a different place. That morning I marveled at the beauty of the sunrise and the power of the good Wyoming wind. Felt the soothing touch of my wife's hand and heard the melody of her laugh. God's blessings too numerous to count.

A few days later a thick envelope arrived from the state penitentiary, an 18-page letter from Mark Farnham. He told me how at the age of 24 he'd moved west, lured by the prospect of good money in the Wyoming oil fields. But he'd gotten addicted to cocaine and soon owed twenty-five

thousand dollars to drug dealers. He panicked, bought a pistol at a pawnshop and robbed a bank. Something snapped when I pulled him over. Fury and fear took over. He would live with the guilt of that day until he died, he said. "I don't deserve the gift you've given me, Stephen."

Later that year I went to a revival at the prison. Mark was wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt. Standard prison gear. He looked up at me, squinting in the sun from behind glasses. Not a monster at all. Just a guy who'd struggled on his own, gotten scared and didn't know where to turn. Like me.

We wrapped each other in a huge bear hug, the hatred I'd once felt now gone, vanquished by the love of a God who doesn't give up on us even when we give up on ourselves. "I'm glad I didn't kill you," I said.

"Not half as glad as I am that you're alive," he said.

That was nearly 30 years ago. I'm proud to count Mark as one of my best friends. I visit him often. Every year I go before the parole board and ask for his release. I don't know that it will ever happen. But I'm forever thankful for

the reprieve we've already been granted. I've learned that only God holds the key to the prison in our hearts.

Stephen is right. And the greatest love story ever told, the one we have reflected on over the past few days, is God's answer to us. It's his liberation from our prison that is created by sin. And the question I'd ask us, is do you want to stay in prison, or do you want to exit through the door God has opened for you?

Perhaps you are in a prison of sin that you battle. Maybe you've tried for a long time to overcome it, but can't seem to. Maybe no one really knows about it. Or maybe you justify it and think to yourself, no big deal, it's just a bad habit, just a little gossip here, or just a reaction to stress or other things when I do this or look at that that. And so what happens is it gets hidden, and it can overtake us. We can rely on it more and more to cope with things in life. We can avoid talking about it thinking no one will understand. We can end up like Mark who's cocaine addiction led him to attempted murder. The sin snowballed. The point is that God does understand. He chose to do something about sin, and today is our liberation day. As we hear in the second reading on Easter Sunday, ***“do you not know that a little least***

leavens all the dough? Clear out the old yeast so that you may become a fresh batch of dough inasmuch as you are unleavened.”

Look at your lives and realize that whatever it is you might be battling or justifying is “no big deal” or pretending isn’t a part of you is there, and turn it over to God. Go to Mass. Go to confession. Pray. Let God into your life, not just a little bit of it, but all of it. Release yourself from shame, and know that God loves you more than you can ever imagine.

Perhaps you are in a prison of anger like Stephen. Maybe you’ve been burned by family or friends or coworkers. Maybe you think of one person and you can’t stand seeing them. Maybe the person has never apologized to you. If that’s the case, look to the cross. Think about how Jesus says “forgive them for they know not what they do.” Ask for His help to let go, to liberate yourself from that pain, knowing that Jesus knows what it’s like as well to be gossiped about, betrayed, rejected and hurt by people, even his closest friends. Think about when we say “peace be with you” and Communion that you are about to receive, and remember that Jesus Body is given not just for some, but for all. Who are you estranged from or having a hard time reconciling with? Maybe you’ll even see them reluctantly later

at dinner today. Confront the past but also strive to seek for the peace that forgiveness brings.

Lastly, who in your life is imprisoned by sin or painful life situations? Rarely when you sit down to an Easter dinner or say to someone how are you doing will that person say “not too good, I’m struggling with a growing alcohol problem” or “I’ve really been misusing my computer or iPhone and looking at things I shouldn’t” or “I’m lonely and no one ever calls me.” We as humans, we cover sins and pain up. It’s unpleasant to think about. But that’s not what Jesus does. When he arrives and meets the apostles, he’ll show them his wounds, not to shame them, but to show them how much He loves them. He’ll burst in to meet them where they are at, holed up in fear. We need to always look for signs when someone may be in pain or hurting or have something they don’t want to talk about. People put themselves in so many bad situations and sometimes we just can’t ask for help. So open your eyes and make that move to help someone who may be too afraid or ashamed to ask for help. By reaching out to his assailant Stephen in taking that step brought so much love into that man’s life and helped liberate him from his real prison. May we do the same with each other.

Easter is indeed a great celebration, but we also can't forget what the day is all about or where we have been. Sin is ugly; the wounds on Jesus resurrected body are still there. And all of us are wounded because of sin. My hope is that wherever you are at in life, you let Jesus heal those wounds by thinking about all He has done for you, and how much He loves you. Let Jesus be the key to liberate you from the prisons we can put ourselves in as life goes on. Let His love flow through you to help people in your life who are hurting. And remember that no matter what happens in life, even if you go through a moment where you let yourself or others down, that when you pick yourself back up and say "Jesus, help me" and "Jesus, I trust in you" He will be there, always and forever. Sin is an unpleasant reality but there's no hiding it forever. Far more powerful though is the power of love, mercy and forgiveness - so let the Risen Christ be your liberation, your victory, and let Him in to your life not just on Easter Sunday or part of your life, but in every part of your soul knowing that He is the new leaven, and His message to you is always the same: peace. What a wonderful thing to experience. God holds the key to the prison in our hearts. So let the risen Lord turn it and set you free.

