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Pope Francis reads from a sheet of paper, while standing behind a microphone and a clear lec

Pope Francis leads the recitation of the "Regina Coeli" prayer from the window of his studio in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Easter Monday, April 10, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The women disciples, who were the first to meet the risen Jesus, offer a lesson to all Christians: "We encounter Jesus by giving witness to him," Pope Francis said.

The entire city of Jerusalem had seen Jesus crucified on the cross, yet the women who find his tomb empty, run to share the good news that he is alive, the pope said before reciting the "Regina Coeli" prayer with visitors gathered in St. Peter's Square April 10, Easter Monday, a public holiday in Rome.

The experience of the women disciples is a reminder, the pope said, that "when one encounters Jesus, no obstacle can prevent us from proclaiming him."

"If instead we keep his joy for ourselves," he said, "perhaps it is because we have not yet truly encountered him."

Francis also used the midday appointment to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which ended some 30 years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

"With a grateful spirit, I pray to the God of peace that what was achieved in that historic passage may be consolidated for the benefit of all men and women of the island of Ireland," the pope said.

Francis began his main talk, a commentary on the day's Gospel reading, by asking people to think about why the risen Jesus appeared to the women disciples first.

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It is simple, he said, the women were the first to go to Jesus' tomb.

Even though they were mourning like all the disciples and frightened as well, "they do not stay home paralyzed by sadness and fear," the pope said. They go to the tomb to anoint his body and "that gesture of love prevails over everything."

The Gospel of Matthew says an angel tells the women that Christ has risen and, as the women are running to tell the disciples the news, "Jesus met them on their way and greeted them."

Too often, the pope said, Christians seem to think they will keep Jesus closer to them if they don't tell anyone about him. Or, at least, they will not have to face judgment, criticism or questions they don't know how to answer.

But "this won't do," the pope said. Good news is meant to be shared.

Thinking of the women disciples, Francis asked people in the square, "When was the last time you witnessed to Jesus?" and he prayed that Mary would "help us be joyful proclaimers of the Gospel."