

News from Mount William, New Hampshire

A sermon preached at the Easter Sunrise Service in Niles Town Plaza, hosted by Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California, on Sunday, April 16, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 21:1-17](#) and [Psalm 103:1-14](#)

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It's been a quiet week in Mount William, New Hampshire, my home town. Howard Friend, the minister at the Mount William Congregational Church, was busy, as most pastors are during Holy Week. At the beginning of the week, he visited Eloise Meaney in the hospital in Concord. Howard always smirks a bit when he says her full name because it is so inaccurate. Eloise has been one of the friendliest, supportive people in his church, and she seems to be the same way in the rest of her life. Hardly a meanie.

Howard wondered if he was remembering accurately as he stood at her hospital room door. Could it actually be that Eloise was in the same room her husband had been in all those years ago? Howard had been at the Congregational Church only a few weeks when Joe was rushed to the hospital by members of the volunteer fire department. Joe's cardiac issues were critical and Joe sensed that he won't be on the earth all that much longer.

Howard¹ was still a wet behind the ears minister and he wanted to talk about the weather, town gossip, politics, even the pending baseball season – just not what Joe wanted to talk about. Joe wanted to talk about his memorial service.

Finally, Howard asked Joe, “Joe, doesn't it bother you? Aren't you frightened?”

Joe smiled and said, “Preacher, I know I'm not going to be around much longer, but I'm not afraid. I've taken a peek at the back of the book.”

“What do you mean?” Howard asked.

Joe said, “About 10 years before you came to Mount William, I had my first heart attack. They called it cardiac arrest. I can remember the medical team thinking I was dead. I can also remember the tremendous feeling of being surrounded by God's love. I was revived by the doctors, but ever since that day I have been unafraid to die. I've been there and it doesn't frighten me. I know that sooner rather than later I am going to die, but that won't be the end. I will, once again, be surrounded by God's love.”

Howard has held on to that description, that hope, ever since. And every time he is with someone who is dying, he imagines them being surrounded by God's love. And every time he works on an Easter sermon, he thinks about that conversation with Joe Meaney.

And I guess I agree with him – that Joe's experience of what comes next is a way of making sense of the resurrection of Jesus – but I can't help but wonder if Heidi Neumark²

¹ Adapted from a story shared in an email from [sermons.com](#) (dated 11 April 2017), citing Robert L. Allen, *His Finest Days: Ten Sermons for Holy Week and the Easter Season*, CSS Publishing Company.

² The rest of this sermon is adapted from Heidi Neumark, “Resurrection by inches: Living with regret,” *Christian Century*, (14 May 2014): 13.

has a better understanding, or at least an understanding that impacts our living, not just our dying.

It's been seven years since the washcloth incident, but Heidi's regret is still fresh. Her mother, Phyllis, moved in with them – Heidi, her husband Bill, and their son Jim – when Phyllis's Parkinson's disease had made it impossible for her to live alone. They wanted Phyllis to stay with them as long as possible, so they managed to juggle their schedules with the needs of an aging parent, and when Phyllis's health went downhill, they were able to pay for help, thanks to the sale of Phyllis's house. Phyllis knew who Heidi, Bill, and Jim were right up until her final night, and there was some comfort in that. But for Heidi, on the other hand, there are still things that keep comfort illusive. A big one is that she can't forget that washcloth.

It was several months before Phyllis's death, and the day had not begun well. Heidi made the mistake of checking her e-mail before praying and thus began the morning with an angry message from someone whose nose was out of joint because they had been excluded from some e-mail discussion. And instead of drinking coffee, she was cleaning up spilled urine that would not have spilled if she had just emptied the commode the previous night instead of letting it wait until the morning when the liquid sloshed over the top. So, she dealt with all that and then, finally, Heidi went to take a shower up on the third floor where her bedroom is.

At last she was refreshed and ready to start the day over. She was clean; the floor was clean; and the e-mail was sort of cleaned. But her mother was not. Phyllis asked Heidi for a washcloth, which was back up on the third floor. Some people have to struggle to get an elderly parent to wash, and here was Phyllis asking for what she needed to be clean. It was completely reasonable to ask for a washcloth. But she might as well have been telling Heidi to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. She couldn't do it. She was already late, and the fact that this additional task was expected of her made her suddenly furious. Even in that moment, Heidi knew her fury was misplaced, but she was helpless before it and her mother took the brunt of the fury.

If Heidi was listening to a friend tell the story, she would offer the friend absolution. She would, in fact, insist that her friend was forgiven. But it's been seven years, and Heidi still cannot access that word of peace within herself. The tears still sting and slosh over her pail of remorse.

At some level, Heidi knows that if Phyllis could, she would grab that pail of remorse and toss it out the window. Phyllis would forgive her. In fact, Heidi is quite certain that her mother *has* forgiven her. But in a way, that makes it harder. Knowing of Phyllis's unfailing love and grace makes Heidi feel worse about her own failure. Of course, this happens most strongly when Heidi envisions her mother at her very best, now in heaven knowing as she is known and seeing her daughter with the eyes of God, and when Heidi is at one of my lowest moments. What about God's forgiveness? God is always in a best moment and ever aware of our worst. Does that divine forgiveness erase our regret or increase it?

Jesus' first word to the disciples on the other side of the locked doors is *peace*. This morning, Heidi imagined herself in that room, staring at his wounds and accepting the

resurrection miracle. She imagined embracing the improbable, exciting mission commended to her in the words that follow. But peace? Peace is another story.

After Jesus called Peter to feed his sheep, did Peter ever think back on that day around the charcoal fire when he denied the one he dearly loved? Did Peter remember when Jesus yelled at him and called him a terrible name? When Peter stood to preach on Pentecost and 3,000 were baptized in one day, did he go home and lie awake wishing he could take back his actions on another day? According to the psalm, our transgressions are removed “as far as the east is from the west.” If we accept that as true, then it seems that regret should not linger. But in my experience, forgiveness does not erase regret. At least not immediately, anyway. At least not yet for Heidi.

This Easter morning, I am thinking that if our mind and heart are not yet in sync with what should be – with sin removed to a distance beyond my reach – perhaps mere inches matter. We might envision regret like the giant stone that sits at the mouth of the tomb. The stone is rolled aside, not away. It’s still there, inches from the entrance, but it’s not blocking anyone’s resurrection. The stone that’s rolled aside allows for feeding sheep, baptisms, and hopeful love of every kind. The Easter angel does not make the stone magically disappear. In Matthew, the angel of the Lord rolls back the stone and sits on it. Does the angel prevent the stone from impeding us? It’s still there, heavy as a regretful heart can be, but it’s not blocking anyone’s way forward.

I find some comfort in noticing that Easter seems to have come in inches for the disciples as well. A week after that first word of peace they are back behind the same closed doors. It seems that they have scarcely moved at all. But there is nothing solid to hinder them, and soon they will head out.

After her own week of years, Heidi’s not in the same place. She still hasn’t left the washcloth behind with the old grave clothes, but she hopes to. And she is inching her way forward in the light of Easter. And this year, perhaps, when she pauses to consider that familiar stone (or the wash cloth), her eyes will be drawn instead to the bright robes of the angel who keeps the stone in its place. And the resurrection will continue to inch forward – in her life and in ours.

That’s the news from Mount William, New Hampshire, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children go to Sunday School every week.