

News from Mount William, New Hampshire

A sermon preached at Niles Town Plaza, Fremont, California,
on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 16:1-8](#)

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It's been a Holy Week and Mount William, New Hampshire, my hometown. On Wednesday afternoon, the teachers, students, and a few parent helpers gathered in the middle school lunchroom for a formal tea. It was Janet Dunn's idea. She started teaching Social Studies at the Middle School this year and her seventh graders are studying U.S. History this semester. She had scheduled her lesson plans so they got to the Boston Tea Party at the end of March, thus creating her excuse for holding a formal tea party at the Mount William Middle School, something she wanted to do for about a dozen years.

You see, Janet Dunn grew up in Mount William and was in fifth grade when the Elementary School had its final Victorian Tea, a tradition that Ginny Spinda created and that disappeared when she retired. Janet loved the tea. For her, the worst part of leaving the elementary school was not being able to attend the tea anymore. The tea at the elementary school was always held on the Wednesday before Spring Break, a little detail Janet wanted to recreate. Next week is break.

Like in the days when Mrs. Spinda (she will always be Mrs. Spinda to Janet) ran the tea, Janet Dunn made sure the students dressed up for the occasion. The boys wore shoes that pinched their toes and neck ties, even though some of them couldn't keep their shirts tucked in. Most of the girls wore spring dresses and ribbons in their hair (even though lately it's been feeling more like late winter than early spring), and some of them even wore white gloves. The sight of them reminded me of what church looked like in my childhood on Easter.

There is something that happens to us when we get dressed up. The tradition of getting new clothes for Easter actually has roots in the early church. Baptisms were celebrated during the Great Vigil of Easter. Those who had spent Lent preparing for baptism would step into the waters of baptism as naked as the day they were born.¹ When they emerged from the waters, they were given a new robe, new clothing to symbolize their rebirth as a new creation.

Baptisms were a reenactment of the Easter miracle. We die to our old selves, we are buried in the waters with Jesus, and we rise to new life with Jesus, transformed, a new creation.

When Dylan Manetti thinks about the power of the resurrection to transform lives, he thinks back to an experience he had at the state prison years ago.² The prison guards at the State Prison knew Dylan not only as a lawyer, but also as a spiritual person, so they

¹ Tom Gruber, "Nude Baptism In Early Christianity," *Christians Talk About Sex*, <https://nudebaptisminearlychristianity.blogspot.com/> (accessed 4 April 2026).

² This character and exchange with the prisoner is based on a story told by David Keck, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, 16 April 2014, 20.

asked him to try to talk to a depressed inmate named Kevin. As a lawyer, Dylan was able to get a private room – the whole attorney-client stuff – and he simply sat with Kevin and told Kevin that he believed in his bones: that God loved Kevin and already dwelled in his heart. That was all – no sermon, no extensive prayers. Dylan just looked at the man who sat across from him and quietly told him this truth. I don't know if it was the words Dylan said, or the compassion in Dylan's eyes, or the presence of God that caused the transformation. I just know that Kevin, who was seen by the guards as one of the prisoners, was seen by Dylan as a beloved child of God. And Kevin started to cry.

Dylan understood what Kevin did not: that his life was already in Christ. Perhaps his life was so deeply hidden beneath all kinds of mistakes, crimes, and sins that Kevin couldn't see it, so hidden that few others even bothered to look. But Dylan saw it and he revealed the great mystery of God's love. And this inmate, this person who society treated as a thing, was overcome by a glimpse of that love.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is a contemporary setting of an ancient hymn of the church, *O magnum mysterium*.³ The translation begins, "O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger!"⁴ The mystery of Jesus is not only that farm animals were the first to see him. The mystery of Jesus is the depth of love his life and death and resurrection reveal, a love that embraces even the people our society throws away – and a love that embraces even us.

The youth group at Mount William Congregational Church was having a discussion on this very topic, a discussion about the expansiveness of God's love, last Sunday. Somehow the conversation drifted and one of the kids started talking about a news item she'd read about in the fall. There's a New Hampshire law that bans "loitering and prowling" and apparently is being used the police to essentially criminalize homelessness.⁵ Some of the kids got pretty heated and the next thing Sally and Jim (the youth group leaders) knew, a group of the youth were planning on going to Concord sometime during spring break to hand out food. They decided they didn't care if it's illegal. If people are hungry, we should feed them.

There are lots of reasons to thank God for and to pity youth group leaders. The youth plotting to potentially break the law is one of them. This was not the youth group meeting Sally and Jim had planned, but they knew they were witnessing something special. There was a passion in these kids' hearts, something different, something transformative. Sally and Jim have tried to find a time to meet with Howard Friend, the minister at Mount William Congregational Church, to talk about what the youth are planning. Given that it's Holy Week, a particularly busy week for ministers, plus the fact that Rev. Friend was spending a lot of time at the hospital with Sheila Peck this week, has made finding a time to talk difficult.

³ You can hear a beautiful recording of this setting at <https://youtu.be/tZ-nuU-hda8>.

⁴ Translation from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_magnum_mysterium (accessed 4 April 2026).

⁵ Charlotte Matherly, "NY Man, ACLU sue state over loitering law they say will allow people to 'arbitrarily punish unhoused people," *Vally News*, <https://vnews.com/2025/10/05/unhoused-man-sues-new-hampshire/> (posted 5 October 2026, accessed 4 April 2026).

Sheila⁶ was ordained a Congregational minister just a couple years before the Congregationalists merged into the United Church of Christ. At that point, she became a UCC minister, one of the few women serving as clergy in the denomination. She retired three decades ago, moved to Mount William to be near her grandchildren, and joined the Congregational Church. She became a great-grandmother nine years ago, at age 86. She was in the hospital because her heart was failing.

This past week, she was not wearing the black Geneva robe she wore for decades during Holy Week. This past week, she wore a blue hospital gown. Rev. Friend was there every day this week. She had been a friend, a sort of mentor who didn't meddle, when Howard arrived in Mount William and started his ministry. He's been going to the hospital as much from himself as for his mentor. And on Thursday, after the Maundy Thursday service, he headed back. He kept vigil with the family that night. The end was very near.

Howard has been with people when they've died before. This time it was different. This time he was there for the duration, and with that much time, he didn't know what to do, so he and the family started reading Psalms.

He wasn't sure which Psalms to read. Psalm 118 might have been a terrific choice. It celebrates God's victory over death, calling us to celebrate the steadfast love of God and to rejoice in the day that the Lord has made. But maybe Sheila needed a psalm of lament, such as Psalm 22. "My tongue clings to my jaws" – how often had the family moistened her parched lips with a sponge? Or a Psalm of confession, since she knew she depended, in life and in death, on God's mercy.

They decided to read through the Psalms. They trusted that God's Spirit would be at work as needed and that the fullness of Sheila's life with God – joy, lament, confession, and all – had not been defeated by aging and the vicissitudes aging brings.

They were long past Psalm 23 when Sheila stepped into the valley of the shadow of death. Rev. Friend and the Peck family watched as she made her transition from this life to the one to come. Just before she died, Sheila opened her eyes and seemed to be staring off into space. Howard was certain that she was seeing something that the rest of them could not see.

When Howard got home to get some rest, he found himself wanting Sheila to be there to tell him what she saw. But she can't be there, and she won't tell anyone anything.

One of the things I love about the Gospel of Mark is its abrupt ending. The angel tells the women who've come to the tomb that Jesus has been resurrected and that they should go tell the other disciples. Then Mark tells us, they "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

I find myself wondering if Howard will end up telling others what he saw in Sheila's eyes in the early hours of Friday morning. I wonder if Sally and Jim will tell Howard or the parents about what they witnessed in the youth group meeting – not so much about the plans the youth made as about transformation they witnessed in the lives of the youth. I

⁶ Based on another story told by David Keck, *op. cit.*

wish Dylan Manetti would tell more people about the transformation he witnessed at the State Prison years ago.

“Bright is the day that dawns with new life, casting death’s grim shadow from the garden. Bright is the future for even the most humble soul, rising up in the arms of angels. Bright is the promise to all the Earth, sharing peace among the children of light. Let every voice sing this shining song, for we have been set free, we have been ransomed from our own history, given a chance to live again, to hope again, and to see the healing of God spread like sunlight into the rooms of time.”⁷

The resurrection, it seems to me, is happening all around us. Will we notice it? And if we notice it, will we tell others about it?

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

⁷ Bishop Steven Charleston, status update on *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/steven.charleston.5/posts/10204044984111911> (posted and accessed 19 April 2014).