

Resurrection by inches

**It's been seven years, and I cannot access Jesus' word of peace. The tears still sting and slosh over my pail of remorse.**

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue



Thinkstock

It's been seven years since the washcloth incident, but my regret is still fresh. My mother moved in with us—my husband, son, and me—when her Parkinson's disease had made it impossible for her to live alone. We wanted her to stay with us as long as possible, so we managed to juggle our schedules with the needs of an aging parent, and when her health went downhill we were able to pay for help, thanks to the sale of her house. My mother knew who we were until her final night, and there was some comfort in that thought. But I, on the other hand, have not found comfort. I can't forget that washcloth.

It was several months before her death, and the day had not begun well. I made the mistake of checking my e-mail before praying and thus began the morning with an angry message from someone who had been excluded from a church e-mail. Instead of drinking coffee, I was cleaning up spilled urine that would not have spilled if I had emptied the commode the previous night instead of letting it wait until the morning when liquid sloshed over the top. Finally I went to take a shower up on the third floor where our bedroom is.

At last I was refreshed and ready to start the day again. I was clean, the floor was clean, and the e-mail was sort of cleaned. But my mother was not. She asked me for a washcloth, which was back up on the third floor. Some people have to struggle to get an elderly parent to wash. Mine was reasonably asking for a washcloth. But she might as well have been telling me to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. I couldn't do it. I was already late, and the fact that this additional task was expected of me made me suddenly furious. I knew that my fury was misplaced, but I was helpless before it. If I were anyone else, I would offer absolution. But it's been seven years, and I cannot access the word of peace. The tears still sting and slosh over my pail of remorse.

I know that if she could, my mother would grab that pail and toss it out the window. She would forgive me; in fact, I believe she has forgiven me. But in a way, that makes it harder. Knowing of her unflinching love and grace makes me feel worse about my own failure. Of course, I am envisioning her at her very best, now in heaven knowing as she is known and seeing me with the eyes of God, and I am remembering myself 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*. I imagine myself in that room, staring at his wounds and accepting the resurrection miracle. I imagine embracing the improbable, exciting mission commended to me 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 has not erased regret. Not yet anyway.

These post-Easter days, I am thinking that if my 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, preventing it 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 my own week of years, I hope to do the same—to leave the washcloth behind with the old grave clothes and inch my way forward in the light of Easter. And when I pause to consider that familiar stone, my eyes will be drawn instead to the bright robes of the angel who keeps the stone in its place.