

**May 7, 2017**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**The Rev. Keri T. Aubert**  
**St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT**

**Acts 2:42-47**  
**Psalm 23**  
**1 Peter 2:19-25**  
**John 10:1-10**

Life is an ever-changing journey. It includes ups and downs, turns left and right.

Sometimes life is like walking an easy path through an expanse of gently rolling hills. The destination is visible. There is choice of route and time to plan. Dips and turns are easily navigated.

At other times, life is more like riding a roller coaster. The route is nonnegotiable and reveals itself only as it progresses. The elevation changes are like mountains and the turns are like razors. Everything happens at breakneck speed.

Can you tell that I don't like roller coasters?

One of the wonders of being a priest is being invited to accompany others on their life journeys. Those journeys are at times meandering and at times hurtling. To my grateful amazement, I sometimes find myself a witness to another person's important life event. Shifting from person to person, from event to event, it feels a bit like being on my own roller coaster. It's certainly not as extreme as the rollercoaster occupied by the person I'm with, but it's a roller coaster just the same. It can be difficult or unsettling, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Actually, I hope you, too, sometimes feel that way. In the priesthood of *all* believers, you, too, are tasked to accompany others. If you accept that charge, you, too, are touched by their life experiences. You might say that the members of a community of faith sometimes, necessarily, are on a roller coaster ride together.

I feel like we're on one right now. The last two Sundays, our regular services of Holy Communion included the baptisms of Josephine and Connor, during which we celebrated their initiations into the body of Christ. Next Sunday, our regular service of Holy Eucharist will include the burial of Marjorie Robison, during which we will celebrate her temporal life on Earth and her eternal life in the risen Christ. Between those celebratory Sundays lies today.

The fact of Marj's death has been hard to absorb. On Friday night, Jakki and I were discussing the past week. We agreed then about something that remains true: it feels as if Marj died years ago; at the same time, it feels as if she hasn't died at all; it feels as if time is meaningless. It's unsettling. But, today, I suggest we try to go with that. Let's try to take ourselves off both the winding path and the rolling coaster. Let's try to linger out of time and also out of place.

Whether you realize it or not, that lingering out of time and place is actually always a goal of every liturgy. Until recently, to symbolically remind myself of that intent, I removed my watch before every Sunday service. Episcopalians, also known as the frozen chosen, aren't spontaneously emotive like evangelicals. Nonetheless, the structure and beauty of our own worship tradition is intended to untether us. The hope is that, untethered from time and place, we are able to experience the Transcendent, the Holy, the Divine. The hope is that we experience God.

On Sunday mornings, the clearest expression of that intent is located at the beginning of the rite of Holy Eucharist, during the dialogue called the *sursum corda*. *Sursum corda* translates as "lift up your hearts." The only time that phrase is used is at the beginning of the Holy Eucharist. Through it each of us is invited to consciously approach what might loftily be called the throne of God. When we do so, as a gathered body, we narrow the gap between heaven and earth.

Of course, God is always reaching out to us, and God is always inviting us to reach back. It is perhaps most visible to us during springtime, which in the northern hemisphere fittingly corresponds to our celebration of Christ's resurrection. God's beauty is all around us. All we have to do is notice.

Last week I was the Day School chapel officiant while Chaplain Eric was on the sixth-grade field trip to Washington, D.C. For three mornings I preached about prayer. Each day I emphasized one of the three boxes into which author Ann Lamott distills all prayer: help, thanks, and wow. On Thursday, "wow" day, I brought in visual aids: cherry tree blossoms, a large sliced geode of Utah septarian, and a photo of the Orion Nebula taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. It was pretty great to show these items in turn and to hear little voices spontaneously whisper, "Woouooooooow." "Wow" is a prayer of praise, perhaps with some thanksgiving thrown in. "Wow" is an articulation of our reaching back to God; at the same time it implicitly acknowledges God's reaching out to us. That morning in chapel, the gap between heaven and earth seemed particularly narrow.

You've probably heard of the idea in Celtic spirituality of "thin places" or "thin spaces." They're general found in nature, such as at the holy trees and holy wells found in Ireland. I've been fortunate to travel and live in many parts of the United States, and I've experienced thin places all over: among the giant trees in western Washington state, in the canyons of southern Utah, among the exhibits in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. On our trip to Ireland, my family visited St. Brigid's well. It was powerful partly because of the leavings of the many who had visited before us. They were visible reminders that our exhalations mingled with those of many centuries worth of pilgrims like us.

Another Christian term for “thin spaces” is “liminal spaces.” The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *limen*, which means “threshold.” The limen is the threshold between one space and another. This term emphasizes that idea that liminal spaces are locations of transition. The location is not necessarily a physical place; it is more generally a state of being. To be in a liminal space is to be betwixt and between, not knowing what will come next, but understanding that something powerful and important is underway. That term might apply to someone preparing for baptism, marriage, or even death. Many Christians since the earliest times have believed that the souls of the dying enter the liminal space between earth and heaven, and that they stay there for a time after physical death.

That brings us back to this Sunday in this place. Untethered from time and place, maybe this becomes no Sunday in no particular place, or maybe every Sunday in every place. Now I’m just speculating. Still, I like to think that this church is a thin space, at least at times. I like to think that the presence and prayers of the people here contribute to making that so. I like to think that we can cultivate a narrowing of the gap between heaven and earth through our intent to make it so, with God’s grace, and by our continuing practice of the Christian faith. I like to think that together we hear the voice of our Shepherd and approach the threshold to the Holy, and that God meets us there.

Our experience of liminality, here or elsewhere, lends us peace and confidence that we take with us to the other spaces of our lives. As we continue to grow in peace and confidence, we are better equipped for all the paths that lie ahead, be they gentle or harsh. As we continue to grow in peace and confidence, we are able to experience God in the most unexpected spaces.

Actually, of course, God is always with us. Jesus came that *we* might have life, and have it abundantly. The Lord *is* our shepherd, the one who accompanies us as we walk rolling hills and ride roller coasters, as we occupy spaces thick or thin, whether or not we even notice. It’s a kind of spiral: the Lord accompanies each of us, giving us the will and the courage to accompany one another; as we accompany one another, we perceive that the Lord is with us. This pattern repeats on and on, and we draw closer to the center that is our Beginning and our End. Maybe *that* is how our shepherd leads us on the way to abundant life. Alleluia.