



From the Pulpit: April 24, 2022

Second Sunday of Eastertide—Confirmation Sunday

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

John 20:19–31

A Collective Murmuration, I: Murmuration of Faith

This scripture passage takes place on Easter Evening, after Mary and the others have encountered Jesus in the garden, the tomb open and empty, the mystery of the risen Christ. So that evening, the disciples gather, still uncertain and afraid. Here is their story from John chapter 20 (from *The Message*).

City to New York. It’s called a murmuration because the whisper of their wings beating in unison creates this kind of murmur. A murmuration. A collective murmuration. The way we move together. The way we thrive together. The way we make an impact together. Thank you Julie and Mignon for this metaphor.

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were awestruck. Jesus repeated his greeting: “Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you.”

Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said.

“When we migrate into one another’s lives for collective celebration and remembrance, there’s a kind of reverberation between us as well.”

In worship this spring we need this metaphor too. Not just for our Outreach Benefit but for the spring season of worship. Our church schedule includes its own seasonal migration, migrating into one another’s lives for Confirmation, Choral Music, Mother’s Day, Youth Sunday, Children’s Day, Memorial Day, each day hosting a crowd, each day bringing us together to celebrate and remember. When starlings migrate, the sound of their wings reverberates. When we migrate into one another’s lives

for collective celebration and remembrance, there’s a kind of reverberation between us as well.

Today we begin a sermon series that Christine and I will preach this spring called “A Collective Murmuration” inspired by Julie Danilek and Mignon DuPepe—our Outreach Benefit leaders—who propelled us this spring toward collective justice-seeking action with the metaphor of starlings flying in concert across the sky. Maybe you’ve seen a starling murmuration, a starling flock swooping and dancing across the heavens as they migrate from Rome to Denmark, from Kenya to London, from Mexico

Scientists who study the migratory murmurations of starlings aren’t quite sure exactly how they all know to fly in unison, but scientists have a hunch, each individual starling is in tune with six or seven of their nearest neighbors.¹ They listen to their nearest neighbors. They communicate with their nearest neighbors.

¹ Photographs and Text by Søren Solkær. “Gazing at the ‘Black Sun’: The Transfixing Beauty of Starling Murmurations” *The New York Times*. April 4, 2022.

Me to, my six closest friends, then they to theirs, and soon the whole flock knows the way. An avian phone tree. A chain reaction. There might be thousands upon thousands in a flock, but a single bird can change the trajectory of the whole multitude. An apt metaphor for the body of Christ.

Like starlings, each of us rely on the six or seven people in our inner circle, the ones from whom we are inseparable, the ones who are our most treasured, most valued, most cherished. For one of you, it's your best friend, for another, it's the guys in your boat each evening for rowing. For one of you, it's your sibling without whom any of this is possible. For another, it's your mom, your dad, your aunt, your grandma, just a text message away. And in the long season when we are separated from the saints of light who have gone before us by that thin veil between heaven and earth, we are just a wing and a prayer away, inseparable. Your six or seven people each have their own six or seven people to whom they are connected, and they have their own six or seven people, and soon enough, the entire globe is interwoven, at which point we begin to notice how each of us are part of this ever-unfolding mathematical equation of love, care, and connection: an organic, fluid, embodied spiritually-centered flock, all of us moving in tandem, synchronized, every life influencing another.

Do you remember the scene in *Schindler's List* with the girl in the red coat? Maybe it's too old a movie for you, it came out in 1993. *Schindler's List* is a story set in Poland during the worst of the Nazi concentration camps, a true story about a man named Schindler who saved more than a thousand Jewish refugees who may otherwise have been killed. The whole movie is set in black and white, monochrome, except for one scene, one character, whose red coat stands out against the gray. The little girl in the red coat is three and a half years old, walking all alone through the chaotic streets,

while Nazis gather up anyone and everyone and force them up into train cars. But the little girl in the red coat is virtually unnoticed as she weaves through the madness, unharmed. She finds safety when no one else can. She wins safe passage when everyone else is captured. She becomes hope in a hopeless moment.

That little girl in the red coat, the actor who played that little girl, is now in her thirties. She was three and a half when she was in the film, and Stephen Spielberg told her not to watch the film until she was 18. She didn't take his advice and watched it when she was 11, and the horrors of war were so terrifying she never wanted to watch it again. But when she finally turned 18, she watched the film with new perspective and felt proud to be part of telling such an important story. *Schindler's List* was a reminder that each of us have the power to change one another's lives. That each of us can be hope in a hopeless moment.

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She lives in Poland now. And a few weeks ago she became fearful for her own life and for her village when Russian bombs struck just miles from the Polish border where she lives. But she said “I decided to change my fear into action, into helping people.” Remembering her role as a symbol of hope in a hopeless time she said “I thought because of this symbol, I could speak to more people, I could involve more people who don't know me, but they know I played this little girl in the red coat.” She is collecting supplies—first aid kits for soldiers and food for refugees flooding into her country.² She is changing the trajectory of our collective flock. Her action is causing our collective murmuration to bend toward good, to curve toward justice, to swing toward possibilities unimagined in days when all is change, struggle, hardship, and fear.

² Jonathan Edwards. “She wore a red coat in ‘Schindler’s List.’ Now she’s helping Ukrainians.” The Washington Post. April 21, 2022 at 7:08 a.m. EDT.

Challenge, struggle, hardship, and fear. That is something we have in common with Jesus' disciples in the season of Easter. Yes they heard the Easter morning reports. Yes the stone was rolled away. Yes the tomb was empty. Yes Christ is risen. But that's not the end of the story. That Easter afternoon the disciples gather in an unmarked house and lock the door. They are afraid.

They are afraid, and into that fear, Jesus entered. He just showed up. He didn't even knock. He was just there. He entered into that room of fear where his grieving friends faced an uncertain future. Will they be killed like Jesus? Maybe. What should they do next? They're not sure. They do not know what lies ahead. The room is pulsing with fear, grief, and uncertainty. That sounds like us, some days.

(To the Confirmands:) When Bev Kirk and I sat down this week to think over the confirmation year, we noticed how soulful each of you are. We noticed your spiritual center of gravity. We noticed the honesty and steady faith you carry, not just into the sanctuary, but out into the world, into your everyday.

We are all still figuring out what the last two years of pandemic have meant for us, but it was at least fear, grief, and uncertainty unimaginable. Our collective murmuration, our flight path, has been shifted in ways we'd never expected. And in your own individual lives there has also been fear, grief, and uncertainty in its own right. No one has been unimpacted. In light of that we have longed for one another, needed one another, relied on one another, our collective murmuration becoming just that much more of a gift.

So here's what I noticed about Jesus on that Easter evening. Jesus entered into fear. He entered the room of grieving friends. He stood with them in the uncertainty. And he didn't give them false hope. He didn't say "it's all good...it's okay now." Instead he said "Peace." "Peace be with you."

And I noticed he offers a double helping of peace. He speaks peace twice. First when he enters. Then when he breathed the Holy Spirit into their midst. Peace. Peace. A double blessing. And in between the first and second peace? He showed the disciples his wounds. His scars from the crucifixion. He showed them the pain in his hands, his side, as if to say, I am with you always in all this uncertainty. Jesus knew how to accompany the disciples through their grief, fear, and uncertainty because Jesus himself had been there, and now he returned, scars and all, to offer the Peace of the Holy Spirit, the Peace of the Living God, the Peace that passes all understanding. This is a peace that lives within the chaos, a peace that exists within upheaval and disruption, a peace that stands amid grief, a peace that understands pain.

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That's what I noticed about the Easter Jesus, and yet because each of our confirmands have such a deep spiritual center of gravity, I'm guessing they already know this, they already trust this, they already stand within this long stream of embodied love. Jesus says to us "Peace be with you, here are my wounds, peace be with

you, let the Holy Spirit breathe within you." As you live within all challenge, struggle, hardship, grief, and fear, may this deep peace of the Living God enter into your midst. Now and always. Amen.

—Prayers of the People— Squire Prince

Divine Creator, Eternal Architect, and Loving God,

We stand in this moment of rest and community looking before your throne of grace in wonder, worship, and humility. In this continued Easter season we look to the cross, the grave, and beyond at the signs of your presence, love, and splendor.

We thank you God with the budding of flowers, the warming of the sun, and lightening of hearts that you remind us that you are the great redeemer, the great healer, the wonderful source of all life and beauty.

In this service God we give thanks for these young believers, who today make a commitment to jump into their faith and follow you. Lord many of us have stood where they are, maybe a bit scared, unsure, and wary. But when I have stood in that place of questioning, I think of the words that say “I will never leave you nor forsake you”, I find rest in the words that say “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”.

We pray O Lord, that you would fill them with your peace that surpasses all understanding, guide them with your unmerited, favorable love, and that you would strengthen them with your unspeakable joy.

I pray that we your church would be their community of hope, of healing, and of support. That we would walk alongside them as you walk alongside us, reflecting your great light into those moments of their lives may seem dark and lonely. Reminding them that you are the light that dispels darkness, and the warmth that embraces and heals pain.

We turn our eyes to our world that is crying out in pain, O healing balm. We think and pray for those experiencing the pain of war, lockdowns, natural disasters, those who are looking for a place to call home, those stuck in the middle of political battles, and those even in our own homes dealing with loss, disease, and lack of strength. For these things we cry out O Sovereign Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray that we would recommit today to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you. That we would through your spirit do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widows cause, and in everything bring glory to your name, and enlarge your kingdom. In all this we humbly pray, now praying as our wonderful savior has taught us...Our Father....Amen.

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