



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Take up your cross
Matthew 16:21-28
St. Mark's
September 3, 2017*

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Our neighbors in Texas engulfed in these horridness flooding disasters from Hurricane Harvey are cross bearing. We send money, we pray. We look back to times of crisis we have experienced in Little Rock trying to remember **what** that kind of life was like and **what we learned**.

18 years ago, Wednesday, June 2, 1999.

All of Little Rock mourns the crash last night of American Flight 1420 from Dallas at the Little Rock airport. During a severe thunderstorm, Tuesday, shortly before midnight, the aircraft skids off the end of runway 4R, crashes into a bank of landing lights and a metal tower and lands in a flood plain of

the Arkansas River 15 feet below the runway. The steel poles act like a can opener, peeling back the plane's thin shell on its left side, from the captain's controls through the first-class section. Fire engulfs the plane as fuel spills.

The captain and eight passengers have died so far. Five of the dead are from Russellville, one from Havana, Arkansas, and one from Paragould. Throughout the day Arkansans relive the times they were on that same last flight from Dallas to Little Rock.

One of the dead is Sue Gray, a retired Russellville schoolteacher. Gray, 78, was always doing something at All Saints Episcopal Church -- working the flower garden, teaching Sunday school, embroidering altar linens. She had been on a two-week tour of Britain.

Images of the disabled plane speak to the miracle of the 129 survivors, mostly Arkansans. They are the first to survive a U.S. commercial airplane crash since 1994. Conversations in this capitol city center around eye witness accounts from survivors. The stories are a spectrum of human behavior.

One of the first and most haunting reports is by Little Rock native Carla Koen at Children's Hospital Burn Unit. As she

tries to escape from the burning plane through the hole in its side, she is caught on the jagged edges and becomes trapped hanging by one leg upside down. Other passengers spill out over and on top of her, scrambling to get out. “They poured over me while I was hanging there, but no one stopped to help me,” she cries. “One angry, panicked man even screamed at me as I dangled upside down, ‘Move and get out of my way so I could get out of this wreckage.’ I’ll see his face for the rest of my life,” responds this survivor.

I as well have been haunted for years by this man. Would I have stopped to help Carla Koen or would I have trampled over her in my panic for safety from the burning plane? I know how I hope I would have acted, but I can’t be certain. When Carla Koen finally frees her leg and jumps to safety, she soon is caring for two young girls alone and terrified in the adjacent hay field in the driving rain and hail. Erin and Cara Ashcraft, 13 and 10, are on the flight to visit their grandparents in Arkansas. Koen stays with the girls and tries to divert their attention from the disaster, asking where they are from (Flower Mound, Texas), and if they have any pets (yes, a poodle) and if they play any musical instruments (Erin

plays the clarinet). Koen comforts Erin who is distraught because her hair, singed by the fire, is falling out in chunks. “I tried to talk to them about life and how we were alive and that was the most important thing,” Koen says, adding that the girls helped her as well. “They gave me something else to focus on.” Koen doesn’t allow the lack of consideration to help her become a “stumbling block”, an obsession to keep her from reaching out to others.

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More stories surface about 25 members of the Ouachita Baptist University choir returning from a two-week European tour where they had entertained Kosovo refugees in Austria. In the chaos that follows the crash, the singers work again as a team. Barrett Barber, a 19-year-old minister's son, lifts passengers through a hole in the plane above an emergency exit that would not open. Choir member Luke Hollingsworth escapes from the tail section only to go back to help wounded passengers escape. On his own shoulders, the young man carries a woman with a broken pelvis across chest-deep water to safety. Choir director Charles Fuller gets his wife out then

goes back into the burning plane to help rescue an 80-year-old man with a broken hip. He is later seen guiding other passengers out of the fuselage onto the wing of the plane. The acts of heroism don't end even after the young people have gotten survivors off the plane. Rain and huge balls of hail are pelting down on injured passengers lying on the ground. Choir members huddle over them, using their own bodies as human shields against the hail and rain. Young men take off their shirts to form makeshift blankets for the injured. When a physician arrives at the crash **site**, he tells reporters he is "amazed at the calmness and stoicism that I witnessed."

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The heroism does not come without a price. Choir member James Harrison repeatedly runs back into the burning plane to pull passengers to safety. He is overcome by smoke, collapses, and dies. One of the young girls **saved** by James Harrison also later dies at Children's Hospital. Rachel Fuller, Harrison's choir leader's daughter, is fourteen, a 4.0 honor student and oboe player from Arkadelphia.

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Flash forward to June 2004. **5 years** after the crash at the dedication of a memorial to honor heroes of flight 1420.

Comments from survivors:

“Having a life and not wasting a day is what this is all about,” says survivor Kelly Williams. Sharon Agnleman, 43, no longer wears a watch. 69-year-old Little Rock native, Nancy Wood says, “We live each day to the fullest.” Vocalist Kristen Maddox was an operatic singer before the crash, but smoke inhalation severely damaged her voice. Her hands were also critically burned. She finds a new life, graduating from nursing school the month before the memorial. She believes that she was led to this **new** vocation by the compassionate care she received during her many arduous hospital stays.

“Take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Move forward to July 2009. **Ten years** after the crash. The Ouachita singers meet to remember the two of their singers who died, Rachel Fuller and James Harrison, and sing the

songs that made them a community. Their choir director Charles Fuller talks about how **music** has the power to touch and **heal** hearts.

“Take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Is Jesus calling us today to give up our life as James Harrison and Rachael Fuller did? The chances of our ever being in a plane crash are unbelievably slim: 1 in 11 million. We do sometimes meet situations that seem like an airline disaster. A friend or family member dies or is gravely ill or develops cancer or dementia. Our children get into trouble. We lose our job. We cannot meet the house payments. Our spouse leaves us. Our children move away. Today friends and family members lose everything as Houston is flooded. There is no question that we have been given a cross to bear and it is very heavy and we see no Simon of Cyrene around to carry it for us. We feel like Carla Koen, hanging by one leg up side down dangling out of a burning **airplane**.

But there is more to this gospel than about cross bearing and dying. The disciples missed the message and we often do

as well. “**And on the third day you will be raised.**” We know this is true in the life to come, but does the blessing the resurrection occur today, right now for the cross bearing we are doing today? Resurrection and blessing are written all over flight 1420. Kristin Maddox loses her voice, her career, but sees through her pain and suffering another opportunity to serve as a nurse. Nancy Wood, Kelly Williams, and Sharon Agnleman learn what is really important in life, living one day at a time.

Today 18 years later if you attend a performance of the Arkansas Symphony at Robinson Auditorium, you will see that the oboe principal chair is a memorial to Rachel Fuller. If you go to the burn unit at Children’s Hospital you will learn that the doctor there is being supported by an endowed chair in burn treatment given by Rachel’s parents, Cindy and Charles Fuller.

My prayers are that if called to do so, I might become a James Harrison and give up my life for others. But my ability to do this is still in doubt. More realistically I pray that I can be a Carla Koen. When I feel as if I am hanging by one leg upside down in a burning disaster, my experience tells me,

that I will survive. And when I get back on my feet, instead of harboring resentment for the situation and for the people who were not helpful, I pray I can reach out to **serve others** in similar circumstances. My experience tells me this is the only way healing occurs. Another name for this is **gratitude**.
Another name for it is **resurrection**.

Linda S. Caillouet, "Fleeing survivors trod on entangled woman", Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Thursday, June 3, 1999.

Joanna Seibert, "Flight 1420, A community of Survivors and Servants," The Living Church, July 11, 1999.

Andrea Harter, "Surviving 1420," A Four part series, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, January 23-26, 2000.

Andrea Harter, "Flight 1420 survivors to gather, crash memorial dedication today", Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Tuesday June 1, 2004.