

Good morning. What a relief it was to see the sun this week. Temperatures moving up, shorts unpacked. By all appearances we have moved finally into a new season. For most of us this is good news of the highest order. Spring at last. Spring at last. Happy Easter.

Last week Father Vanderveen gave us a peek into another rejoicing community, the disciples—post resurrection. He reframed our concept of doubt, and showed us how the disciples were doubting not for lack of proof, but for joy. **In other words, God's love was blowing their minds.** The palpable presence of God with them was beyond their faculties---overloaded their intellectual circuitry.

In today's texts, attempts to "put it into words" come from King David, and from John. David sings his shepherd song—Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. It is a song we know. But can we hear it, through its familiarity? Green pastures. Still waters. A man, overcome with God's love and power. I shall fear no evil for thou art with me. He sings this hymn, because he can't not. He is bursting. The conclusion of his love song... "I want to live here, in your house, forever."

John tries to communicate the *good news*, through his *good shepherd*, Jesus. The shepherd is kind and knows his own. He cares to the point of death. But he is also the Messiah. Friends, he says, listen to the good news: that for which you have desperately longed for so long, has come and is him and is unbelievably better than we even thought or imagined.

Much of the New Testament is the record of the efforts of the disciples, and their disciples, to put this indescribable power and love into words and images that would penetrate the hearts of future generations, inviting them into relationship with that same God, in their own time.

Today, in our time, three young women have responded to their words, and decided to enter in to The Story, ready and willing to be wowed by God. Yesterday Anya Amanda and Kirsten were confirmed in Middletown by Bishop Smith. They have now publically articulated their commitment to the life of faith through the Episcopal Church, through the sacramental rite of Confirmation. Today they will stand in this congregation and commit to developing their own gifts and ministries in fellowship with us, the community of Saint Ann's.

Last month these three enjoyed the Ivorytown Playhouse production of *Godspell* with some fellow parishioners. One of the scenes from the show that was particularly memorable for them, we discussed at the next class-- the parable of the sower. Seed thrown on a path, scooped up by birds. Seed unable to take root, for the boulders. Sprouts choked by thorns and the sole survivors, those planted and tended in good soil.

The girls talked about what constituted good soil and under what conditions were the birds likely to come, or thorns to choke. In today's youth culture, which is vastly different than the one in which most of us were formed, there are birds and rocks and thorns galore. The odds of stable continuous growth in faith for a young person in this environment are not good. They are not good odds.

So where is the hope? It's in the soil. With rich soil, tended and nourished, the seeds of their faith have got a shot. So... (*Planter box is placed on the pulpit.*)

(*To the confirmands*) I am going to give each of you one of these boxes, as a reminder that you must tend your faith soil, so your roots will grow deep enough to get you through dark times. So that like the psalmist you can walk through the valley of the shadow of death but fear no evil, for you will know God's loving presence and comfort. Tend your soil.

Make no mistake, this will not be an easy process. To grow in faith, you will need to honor the baptismal promises you reclaimed yesterday---to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. All of these things will be the stuff of your Christian life, at the heart of which is a relationship with God that is uniquely yours. Just as you are uniquely God's.

Staying on track spiritually will not be possible within our own power. You will need the Spirit's presence and you will need other Christians to walk beside you, to rejoice with you, to listen to you complain, to sit still with you, and to pray.

As you go forward the prayers and presence of other believers is what is going to help nourish your soil. There are some folks who have already been working on your soil for quite a while, since you were born actually. Your parents. These notes are from your parents and carry their prayers for you. You'd probably prefer they carried a check, but trust me, their prayers are way more essential for your survival in the world.

Now you guys are going to like this. These *notes say* that your parents are *praying for you*. These notes, then, are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace --their prayers. That makes them sacramental. Right? (*Notes placed in box*) So, here you are, your very own sacramental confirmation planter.

Now, your parents are not the only ones who have been praying for you. Your mentors have spent this year caring for you, getting to know you, and they have also offered to you *these notes* which bring their prayers and love. (*Notes placed in box*) Since one of yesterday's promises was about worship and receiving teaching, you have here a sacramental representation of the prayers and love of your clergy. We offer you our spiritual gifts so that you can grow in the formal knowledge of God. We love you and are here to help you grow in faith. (*Notes placed in box*)

You know what. I am fairly confident that its not just us. Your family. Clergy and mentors. I suspect that all of the people in this room love and support you, and are eager to know you. In fact, I know it. (*Pick up **big pile** of notes.*) These folks have been praying for you all year, no joke, and this week especially. Many many of them have written each of you a note bearing their love and prayers. I am going to add these to your sacramental soil. There is a special one here from your vestry. They want you to consider running.

There are some other folks at Saint Ann's praying for you, who adore you and really need you... to love and lead them toward God's love-- our kids. (*Bring out kid cards. Place in box.*)

Girls, you are held in prayer today, not only by this community, but by bishops, priests, deacons and lay people from all over the Diocese, including our arch-deacon, and

all of the deans, canons, and bishops from the cathedral and from Diocesan House in Hartford. (*place in box*) Fertilizer.

There are also people praying for you from all over the country-- priests, deacons, lay people-- from (*place in box one at a time*) Florida, Ohio, Alabama, Michigan, PA, California, MA, South Carolina, New Hampshire, New Britain. (*Hold up one*) And Katherine our Presiding Bishop, has sacramentally represented her prayers in a note to each of *you*. (*place in box*)

There are also people praying for you in other countries of the Anglican Communion. (*place in box one at a time*) New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, England...here is a note from the chair of theology at Oxford, a woman of great faith with a very big brain. If nothing else, you'll have smart soil.

You have people praying for you who are not Episcopalian or Anglicans. Christians, lay and clergy, from other denominations, praying for you by name, who want you to know how overwhelming God's love can be, if we let it in.

You may be too tired or nervous right now to take in the riches of what you have here. Actually, you've kind of got the love and prayers of the whole world in your hands. The amount of love and spiritual power in this one box... I hope you will savor it. We pray that you will allow the support and love in this box to give you strength and courage to love and serve God, as you grow. You might want to save a small set of these as emergency fertilizer...for a dry season. Or a flood. So drink it in girls. Its your sacramental soil and it just might increase your odds.

It must seem really odd to you. All of this love. All of these prayers. From people you do not know. Why would people do this?

Yes. We clearly put the word out that you were getting confirmed. But think about it... people graduate, and people know about it. People get married, heck some of those are even in the paper! But few pray and send blessings to those they have never known. So, what is the deal?

Well there are two deals. First, you girls have got guts. Yes, people get married, are born and die, but **there is something about a young person standing up and saying *I want to know God*, that touches a deep place in people and draws them immediately to your corner.**

Deal number 2. God. God' love is *huge*. Huge as the world. Huger. Huge as a world full of love for YOU. **AND** God's love is *specific*. Jesus, the good shepherd, knows your name and your voice. And as you grow in faith, you will recognize the Spirit moving in your life more and more. People who know this about God, this "specific-huge" thing, they wanted to write to specifically you, so you could taste the overpowering love that they have experienced (or so they pray).

Girls, your corner (hold box) is full. As you sort out what you believe about God, and it will be a sorting process that I hope you will have the courage to continue, I hope you know that at any and every stage of that sort, you are welcome in the Church. You are treasured. We love you. We need you. And we are so proud to call you sisters in Christ. *Amen.*