Reverend Varghese, Reverend Morehouse, Reverend Lamkin, Mr. Allman, Ms. Bagby, Dean Isaacson, Parents, Family, and Friends, Colleagues and Fellow Teachers, Members of the Class of 2016—I am honored that you have asked me here to speak. It is humbling, and frankly a little intimidating, to share with you a thought or two that marks this auspicious occasion. AND TO DO SO HERE, in this place, this remarkable space! I’m kinda non-denominational myself but as I look around, I have to admit: Episcopalians know how to do architecture! At least they did back in the 19th century, in 1846, when this great structure was completed. Did you know that Trinity Church when it opened was the tallest building, not just in New York, but in the United States, surpassed only in 1889 by the Washington monument? Think about that in a little while when you step out onto Broadway, contemplating how the church has been dwarfed by its surroundings. And if you think this majestic place is impressive, just wait until tomorrow, when we assemble at St. John the Divine! That’s an astonishing building...!

In choosing what to say this afternoon—what I hope may be of value as you remember this day—I thought that the two passages read by Peter and Lulu, from Matthew's gospel and from the great Northern Renaissance humanist, Erasmus—I thought these two passages together spoke eloquently about education, what it means to learn and to teach, and the purpose of schooling. Implicit in their message, I think, is a fundamental question: what does one do with, what will YOU do with the knowledge you acquire?—Not just knowledge acquired here, within the proverbial walls of the academy, but out there, outside the traditional precincts of learning. These are obviously weighty matters, and although I am much older (regrettably) than you are, I do not pretend to have answers—older is definitely not wiser! But what I CAN share with some confidence is this: Asking the question in the first place—“what will I do with the knowledge I acquire?”—and placing that question squarely among your priorities—will help you shape, and ultimately help you determine the important choices you inevitably face—especially during these, the formative stages of your young life.

The link between this question and formal education—and where it all may lead—is something I would like to explore further. You know me as a history teacher, so it may not surprise you that I turned to history for some perspective, in order perhaps to glean insight into the vital question that I am suggesting frames this afternoon’s ceremony. In fact, the history of this particular gathering, what we call the “Baccalaureate Service” and more precisely its late medieval origins, which was first documented at Oxford England in 1432, tells us that even many centuries ago, scholarly education constituted a most vital component of people’s engagement with society—not all people, to be sure, but a growing class of persons attached to the spheres of commerce and trade, to the laity, and to the nobility. Certainly, European society was stratified and the pursuit of knowledge was for many an unattainable luxury. Yet for those who followed this path, tutelage in a scholarly discipline at the hands of learned thinkers, and academic guidance within the structured setting of an institution, represented a path toward edification and enlightenment, both spiritual and worldly. It also provided insight into a
world of the past that these young scholars had not known, and offered them a vision
for a greater and more expansive world of possibility than the one they expected to
confront. The traditions of the Baccalaureate marked the culmination of a course of
study designed to train and illuminate the minds of individuals dedicated both to the
calling of the Church and to better comprehend the world of the human past and the
future of human potential. Indeed, the principal character of the humanist sensibility
emerges from this tradition. Thus, the Baccalaureate was an occasion for recognizing
and celebrating those esteemed scholars “dedicated to learning and wisdom.” Now the
highpoint of the Baccalaureate ceremony occurred with the granting of the bachelor’s
degree (the baccalauréat) with laurels (lauriers) — the baccalauréat being typically a parchment diploma
or certificate testifying to the successful completion of the candidate’s curriculum, and
the lauriers being in the form of an address or sermon, an oration reflecting a summation
of the candidate’s mastery of that course of study. The catch was that the lauriers — the
oration laurels — were to be delivered not by an instructor of the college or leader of the
church — but by each of the candidates for the degree themselves, individually, one at a
time! That’s right, the oration was required: Each graduate had to present a discourse
or sermon — in Latin, of course — for the bachelor’s diploma, an address that could last
anywhere from thirty minutes to FOUR hours. That’s four hours of speaking. Seriously.
So, ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2016, because Trinity School has always held
tradition in high regard, we have a little surprise for you: one more hoop you have to
jump through.........kidding!

Seriously though, the apparent severity many centuries ago surrounding the conferring
of these scholarly accolades — to people about your age, if not younger, by the way — led
me to wonder how the knowledge these young medieval graduates had attained served them and served others. The Baccalaureate tells us something about HOW they learned. But what did they do with the knowledge they had acquired? Well, the short answer is I don’t know — although the history books are filled with the insights and thoughts of learned people from this time whose intellectual and practical engagement on matters from the humanities to science helped create and define — for better and for worse — many of the key values and principles of our modern western society. But a little closer to the present, the rigors of the early Baccalaureate I described also led me to reflect about some of the meaningful moments of my own academic experience. Maybe sharing these with you, and one in particular, might have some bearing on your own academic pursuits and on the question I alluded to earlier. It was 23 years ago today, May 19, 1993, at this very hour in fact, that I sat for my oral examination as part of the doctoral degree requirements in art and architectural history. Orals, as we call them, were not quite the equivalent of the 15th century Oxford Baccalaureate — no four-hour address. But I suppose there was some overlap. For almost three hours, I responded to questions from a panel of professors, who were my academic mentors, about a variety of scholarly sources and historical interpretations; identified projected images representing buildings and artworks — or in some cases, provided what might be politely termed educated guesses of images I had never seen before; and expounded generally upon the significance of my specific field, which was western art and architecture from 1750 to the present. Happily, I did pass the exam — the panel conveys the news pretty soon after you leave the room, so as not to prolong the suspense. If they don’t tell you within five minutes or so, after you finish, it might be cause for worry. The longer it goes, the more likely it is that they’re conferring about how to let you down easy! But here’s what I
want to tell you: at the time, this was the most intense academic challenge I had faced—but it was also the most rewarding. I prepared for three months, reviewing articles, memorizing images, seeing art in museums—and reading books and books and books, reading for five or six hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. It’s hard to express how fulfilling—and invigorating—the entire process was. But I can say that after the orals, I understood a bit more about myself and about my capacity for learning. It was the culmination of long course of disciplined study that began for me in high school when the foundation, the preparation for this kind of learning was first introduced to me by my teachers. It is in fact what turned ME towards teaching. It IS what I wanted to do with the knowledge I had acquired.

I know you have worked hard to get here and all of you, each in your own ways, have struggled. The intensity of the challenge can be overwhelming. But I truly hope that this intensity has also given your experience here a measure of inner reward, perhaps of the kind Ally spoke about this morning. I also hope that the experience of learning has offered you a sense of possibility for what you are capable of accomplishing.

The great actor Meryl Streep—that’s right Meryl Streep of all people, who I had the pleasure of hearing deliver a talk at my Alma Mater, Vassar College—said that the consciousness of quality in ANY field of endeavor, what she called engaging in the pursuit of excellence, is “ultimately what sustains the most well-lived and satisfying life.” Whether applied narrowly to an academic discipline such as history or applied broadly, as I think Streep intended, her eloquent words, her recognition that the honest struggle to accomplish something meaningful is what gives that struggle integrity, spoke to me when I was younger, and speak to me still. Does this idea speak to you? For me, it has offered an unambiguous rationale for the acquisition of knowledge and what to do with that knowledge.

“What will you do then with the knowledge you acquire?” Allow me now to suggest that there is, in fact, much to be done! Let me explain: One of the more dispiriting truths of the recent electoral campaigns in this country has been the degree to which malice and downright cruelty has seeped into the political conversation. To be sure, economic challenges and social injustice account, in part at least, for the frustration and anger we hear. But as disturbing, and frankly ominous, has been rhetoric in some quarters that dismisses blithely, sometimes proudly, empirical evidence, reasoned discourse, and rudimentary logic—dismisses, in other words, the very values towards which Erasmus directs us in his defense of education, quoted earlier by Lulu. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing in politics and in the broader reaches of culture, which no doubt is amplified through social and broadcast media, is not entirely new, but rather delineates a troubling feature of the American character. The great historian Richard Hofstadter argued in his 1964 Pulitzer-Prize winning book Anti-Intellectualism in American Life that this anti-rational tendency, going back to the founding of the Republic, was deeply rooted in the customs and conduct of certain American institutions, and among these—regrettably—Hofstadter includes education. In grappling with these attitudes towards learning and knowledge, Hofstadter noted that “Some Ultimate educational values seem forever to be eluding Americans.” [p. 301] He elaborated by observing that the “function of education in inculcating usable skills and in broadening social opportunities was always clear...Yet the value of developing the mind for intellectual or imaginative achievement or even contemplative enjoyment was considerably less clear and less
subject to common agreement.” [p. 309] I believe it is no exaggeration to say—and many others have said it—that the anti-intellectual attitudes Hofstadter identified, which are still with us today, are absolutely antithetical to the Renaissance and Enlightenment values of reason and rational discourse. It is an unsettling reality, but one that I urge you to resist and to contest, and to do so with determination and persistence in your daily lives, in your choice of professions and, yes, in your political engagement. This is one thing you can do with the knowledge you acquire! You — indeed we all—must, to apply Erasmus's formulation, “prevent the doors from being flung wide open to folly and evil.”

So how are the history of the Baccalaureate, my own academic path, and the dangers of willful ignorance that Hofstadter identified more than fifty years ago connected? How might this help address the question I am proposing for you? Well, let me return to where we began: the extraordinary place that surrounds us, here at this moment. The architect who designed and oversaw the building of this magnificent edifice, Richard Upjohn, was an Englishman by birth who immigrated to the United States at a very young age. He had a storied career of many years but the most celebrated work in his lifetime remained Trinity Church and it is still considered by many to be his best. Less well known is that Upjohn was also a passionate advocate for the education of architects. Indeed Upjohn was the driving force behind the creation in 1857, of the American Institute of Architects, the leading professional organization for architects in the United States. He was its first president and in that role he worked tirelessly to instruct and prepare others for the rigors of the profession. Accordingly, and perhaps most telling, he created a library, accumulating volumes on topics wide-ranging and efficacious to the pursuit of architectural knowledge. He said quite simply that “reality and truth” should dominate design. The style of this great church, the Gothic style, Upjohn learned entirely from reading books, books by historians, books by scholars and critics, and books by fellow architects dedicated to instructing anyone willing to undertake the challenge of architectural design. We are in a place created by a man devoted to the pursuit of excellence and confident that wisdom, the wisdom discovered in books, the wisdom of education that is nurtured, cultivated, and cherished can, as the Gospel of Matthew tells us, give light to all in the house.

Thank you and good luck to each and every one of you!