On behalf of the entire St. George’s community, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to our Prize Day ceremonies. For more than a century, the School has gathered each spring to say farewell to its graduates and to honor their contributions to the life of the School. Today we honor the Class of 2016, and we are joined by their schoolmates, the faculty and staff, members of the Board, alumni, friends, and of course, the graduates’ families, who have come from across the nation and around the world to help celebrate this occasion. We bid you all a very warm (if slightly damp) welcome.

As we begin, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and recognize the hard work of the many members of the school community who have made this day possible. In addition to the efforts of my assistant, Jen Kelley, the grounds, maintenance, housekeeping staffs have the campus looking beautiful, our food service staff has been providing us with delicious meals, and countless other school employees have been working for weeks to prepare for this day. It is a Herculean task, especially on a day like today and though for the most part their labors are unseen, their contributions to this event and to the life of the school are invaluable. Please join me in recognizing the efforts of our staff.

Even though we had the chance to recognize our departing faculty at Baccalaureate on Thursday, I would like to make special mention of two members of the faculty who are retiring this year: Patricia Lothrup and Cheryl Jenkins, each of whom has served the school with incredible devotion and great distinction. Cheryl has been at St. George’s since 2004, and Patricia has been a member of our faculty for 22 years. In addition, I wish to recognize and publicly thank Associate Head of School Katie Titus, for her tireless efforts and sage counsel over the past eleven years. Katie is leaving St. George’s in July to begin her tenure as Head of School at Mergersburg Academy in Pennysylviania. Katie, Stuart and their family will be missed here in so many ways, but we wish them all success and plenty of luck in their new roles. Please join me in acknowledging Patricia, Cheryl, and Katie.

Finally, I wish to remind us that in addition to being Prize Day, today is also Memorial Day. I ask that we pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer for all those, including 52 graduates of St. George’s, who have given their lives in the service and defense of the nation.

Thank you. Now, on to the real business of the day. To the Class of 2016, we offer our heartfelt congratulations. You are without question a remarkable class, and in a year that has been especially challenging for me, our board, and many alumni, you have led the school with grace and courage and humor. Thanks to your leadership, and the extraordinary efforts of the faculty, here on campus we have had a year filled with successes, from the classrooms, to college admissions, to SGx, and not one, but two, New England Championship teams, in football and girls hockey. Adding to the list of successes, yesterday our sailing team won the National Championship. Individually, you are artists and athletes, scholars and musicians. In your years here, you have studied, competed, performed, and served the school and our community with real enthusiasm and great success. You developed independence, learned to do your own laundry, and discovered how to navigate the shifting and sometimes treacherous shoals of your social lives. In some fashion or another during your time at St. George’s, you have been challenged both as individuals and as a class and you have triumphed, again
and again. You should be very proud. We will certainly miss all of you next year, but we know that you will bring to your new college communities the same energy and character, intelligence, and humor that you’ve shown in your time at St. George’s. In the meantime, however, I want to take one last opportunity to offer you some perspective.

It has become common, if slightly embarrassing, knowledge among the school community that I am a serious fan of all things “Star Wars.” I’ve seen the movies so many times I can quote them, I still have several action figures that I was given as a twelve-year-old back in 1977, and I do in fact have the “Star Wars” app installed on my phone. It’s awesome, by the way. According to the app, our weather today feels like the planet Kamino. However, “Star Wars” is not the limit of my geeky interests. As some may recall from a Parents Weekend talk I gave several years ago, I am also a big fan of the classical philosopher Aristotle.

My interest in Aristotle came to mind just in the last couple of days, when the New York Times reported that archaeologists in Greece have announced the probable discovery of Aristotle’s tomb, nearly 2400 years after his death. This is a big deal because while the tomb is described and referenced in ancient literature, its location had been lost to history until now. It’s also a big deal because of the man himself and the reach of his learning. For those who don’t recall, Aristotle is one of the most important figures in Western history. He was a student of Socrates, and the teacher of Alexander the Great. Aristotle’s ideas revolutionized everything from physics, to ethics, to zoology, to poetry and theatre. He is considered one of the founders of Western philosophy and is described by some Islamic scholars as the “first teacher.” In short, the man was a rock star of history, and he has been selling out intellectual stadiums for more than two millennia.

But today, in our digitized, multimedia world, for better or worse we have less space for the kind of reflections and introspection that fueled Aristotle’s work. However, we have held onto poetry and philosophy in ways that are actually more prominent than you might realize. So, as you prepare to head into the larger life of the world, I want to call your attention to some observations offered by a different set of rock star philosophers, in this case, actual rock stars, and the lyrics to their songs.

Our first lyric comes from the work of the English philosophers The Rolling Stones, and it offers a reflection on desire and acquisitiveness: “You can’t always get what you want…” Allow me to point out that every one of us assembled here is incredibly lucky. Though we have all naturally had difficulties, challenges, or setbacks of our own, we have also had the chance to live, work, and study in one of the most remarkable places on Earth, surrounded by talented friends and devoted mentors, largely free from the danger and threats faced by most of the world. And yet, we each commonly want something more, or different, or better. As many Buddhist scholars would note, this desire for more is deeply human, but also deeply problematic. Not getting what we want can be the source of incredible disruption of our own lives and the world around us, unless we learn to govern and focus those desires, and to accept that sometimes events don’t work out the way we want them to. In that case, rather than focusing on our wants, and whether we can or do get what we want, it is useful to also be present here, in the moment, and to focus on what we already have. Look around you, even on this rainy day and appreciate the beauty of this place, the companionship of your friends and classmates, the love of your family and friends. As you leave here, while we all hope you find every success, even if you don’t get exactly what you want in the years ahead, know that you can still be happy. In fact, it is always in your power to affirmatively choose happiness. And, in the end, I think you will find that in life a great many things are a result of choice and perspective, not the result of some object or status to be acquired.
The second lyric I’d like to reference today comes from the American philosopher and musician Tupac Shakur, who writes “…even the genius asks questions.” While you have been at St. George’s questions have formed the centerpiece of your experience. You have asked thousands of them, and thousands more have been put to you. They have come to and from your teachers, your parents, and your friends. Some questions have been challenging ones, and I’m sure some have been simple ones. Your job, as graduates of this school is to become the geniuses you all inherently are, and to keep asking questions. Every invention, every breakthrough, every advance in the human condition has come from someone asking a question, challenging conventional thinking, or wondering about a better way to solve a problem. Questions arise from our deep well of curiosity as humans, and, combined with our creativity and reason, questions fuel successful solutions to our problems. In the years ahead, your generation will face not just the manifold challenges and problems of the world today, but also a whole new set of difficulties, some of which we cannot yet even imagine. The way you and someday your children will solve these problems is by asking questions. It is my fondest hope that your time at St. George’s has built in you a finely crafted capacity for asking questions in pursuit of constructive solutions. I hope that we, as a school, have modeled this for you every day in our actions, as we have sought to show you our answer to the question: “How can we be better today than we were yesterday?” Whether you realize it or not, you are each a part of our answer, and in turn, we ask that you carry forward the critical thinking, the asking of good questions, that you’ve been developing and practicing here – the world needs you.

The final lyric I’d like to consider brings us back to England, and to the Golden Age of Rock, in the words of John Lennon and the Beatles: “All you need is love…” While factually not completely true, since food and shelter are necessary, and companionship is useful, philosophically the sentiment is accurate. As you depart this little school, in a far corner of the nation’s smallest state for the larger world beyond our walls, dangers, difficulties, and hatred will be lurking. The good news is that love is the strongest force in the universe. Hate and anger are powerful, and they can flare bright and hot, but like a diamond, love cannot be burned away. It endures, and often grows more powerful in the face of hatred and lies. This is why love is at the center of so many philosophical and religious traditions. Love appears throughout many sacred texts, including the Bible, where the crux of Jesus’ teaching comes down to the phrase he offers to his friends and followers and to us: “Love one another…” I hope that it’s been clear to you even in your time at St. George’s that love plays a role in all of our lives, through the devotion of your parents and the faculty, through your care for one another, and through our hopes and dreams for your futures and that of the world. As you greet that world, may you find friends, work, and companions to love. Because even when the world shows you its ugliness, and it will, know that love always wins.

With that in mind, I will close with one final lyric, this time not from Aristotle or a musician, but from a rock star of a different sort – Mother Theresa. You’ve heard this before in Chapel, but I offer it to you today as a send off upon your graduation. Mother Theresa posted these lines on the wall of her orphanage in Calcutta, where thousands of children have been sheltered and saved. It reads:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self centered;
   Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
   Do good anyway.
If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies;
   Succeed anyway.
The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow;
Do good anyway.
Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable;
   Be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight;
   Build anyway.
People really need help, but may attack you if you help them;
   Help people anyway.
Give the world the best you have and you may get kicked in the teeth;
   Give the world the best you've got anyway.

So, Class of 2016, we wish you Godspeed. You are talented, you are well-trained, and in the words of the school prayer, you are well equipped for the battle of life. Now it's time to give the world your best.

Oh, and one last lyric? “It's better to burn out than to fade away.” Go light up the world.

Thank you.