

Dear Pastor James and members of the St. Mark's Lutheran Church.

I am writing to you as a former teacher who served the children of St. Mark's preschool ministry for eight fulfilling years. As meditations on Jesus's Resurrection soften the edges of a community hardened from embattling a global pandemic coupled with the financial woes that resulted in the loss of our ministry, I think of how the word "Resurrection" changed for me during my years as a preschool teacher. This last testimonial is one of how the spirit of the church opened my heart to the mission: Loving God, Loving Our Neighbor, and it is my hope that some of my firsthand accounts can open hearts to the possibility of creating a new ministry in the future to serve the underprivileged children of Roanoke.

When I came to work at St. Mark's in March of 2012, I was a young graduate student in the Hollins University Children's Literature program. My work hours gave me time to study, and I spent my days playing tag with giggling toddlers on the playground and teaching the importance of handwashing. Then I met Andrew, the eleven-year-old son of a single African American mother on food stamps—and my view of what my purpose was as a teacher changed.

My job was to meet Andrew's school bus at the end of the sidewalk and walk him into the church for our afternoon program. At first I thought nothing of this duty. I met Andrew every day with a smile. But one day he walked into the bathroom and didn't come back out. "I've wet my pants." He finally said, his voice small with embarrassment. "That's ok, accidents happen." I tried to sound lighthearted, despite the sinking suspicion that Andrew's life held a weight that I, in my privilege as a college student, could never fully understand. I slipped him some clean clothes and asked Wil Robertson, the director at the time, if there was a way I could help Andrew more. "Andrew is homeless and has been living in a shelter," Wil said to me. "We are letting him come here for free, but he and his mother are moving tomorrow, in hopes of finding better opportunities." My heart sank. How could I help Andrew in the time that he had left with us?

The next day, I decided to stick to our normal routine so that I wouldn't add to Andrew's feelings of loss. I met him at the bus stop, but instead of chasing the toddlers on the playground that afternoon, I chased him instead. Andrew laughed and dodged me, grinning from ear to ear until his mother showed up. I walked him down the steps and hugged him. "We are always here for you." I said. "Goodbye Ms. Andria." He held me tight. Then, to my surprise, he cried, "I love you." And the realization that I mattered so much to this child made me cry, too.

How had I, a part-time preschool teacher who had only done my job by meeting Andrew at the bus stop, made such a difference in his life? What was this feeling of awakening in my heart? This was April, the time of Jesus's Resurrection from the dead, and for the first time in my life, that word didn't feel so distant and unique. It felt warm and close, as if a part of my heart that I didn't know existed was just learning to beat. My personal resurrection was an awakening from the ignorance that so many people live in, adrift in a reality of never knowing, firsthand, the sufferings of others. I now understood what the preschool ministry of St. Mark's meant to the community, and I knew at that moment, that this was not just going to be a part-time job for me anymore. I wanted to be the stability in children's lives: the teacher waiting at the bus stop.

For the next eight years, I committed my life to making sure I gave each child the love and feelings of home they so yearned for. I held one boy in my arms for an entire afternoon because he missed a mother whom he had not seen in years. Another child, a girl from a formerly abusive household, still feared leaving school and going home, so Wil gave me permission to walk her to the car so she would feel safe during the transition from our care. These were the children we took in

from the community. These were the forgotten children that had nowhere else to go. But we were there, as one parent said, “as a beacon in the dark.”

Over the course of my years working for the church, I learned that personal resurrections can happen every day and change the world in little ways—like in those moments where I felt my heart kindle awake each time a child learned to pray for the first time over his or her snack. Though we raised tuition and veered away from the mission of helping the lower income children of our community under our past director, Keisha Christley, I hope that you, the council, will consider opening your arms once again to the families that other preschools turn away.

This year has welled with many heartaches, but the love I found at St. Mark’s is a part of my faith that shines with joy. I still carry with me the meaning of Loving God, Loving Our Neighbor. St. Mark’s taught me how to show God’s love by embracing all neighbors, not just the ones with something to offer. Every day, this church models what this mission means. St. Mark’s was the food pantry I directed desperate people to during the pandemic. You all were the steadfast shelter for a community in need, and I will always hold thanks in my heart for the depth of character I gained under your roof. If you have any questions regarding the children we nurtured in our program or my time as a St. Mark’s teacher, please do not hesitate to ask me. I hope my experiences can help plant a new seed for a possible ministry in the future.

Sincerely,

Andria Tran