

## At the End: Grace

Rob Gieselmann, Pent. 29C (C. King Sunday), 2013

Before Laura, my wife, died, she spoke words – that would, in essence, be her last – *I've had a good life*, she said right before being wheeled in to gallbladder surgery. At the time, I thought she was being dramatic, so I rolled my eyes – but she wasn't. That night, after surgery, Laura died in her sleep.

When *he* was dying of cancer in 2008, Randy Pausch published his last words – Pausch was a college professor, so he called his last words, The Last Lecture. He wanted to leave a legacy for his three boys, one of whom was still in diapers. In The Last Lecture, Pausch tells a story about the time he was pulled over in Virginia for speeding. The officer noted that Pausch was from Pennsylvania, so Pausch told the officer, *Just moved here*. Making casual conversation, the officer asked, What brings you to Virginia? In fact, Pausch had moved to Virginia *because* he was dying. His in-laws lived there, and he knew his wife would need extra help after he was gone. Should he *tell* the officer all of this? Or should he lie to avoid an awkward conversation? I can tell you – even now, eleven years later, telling people I lost my wife is a conversation-stopper. But in this case, Pausch decided to tell the truth. *I'm dying*, he told the officer. At first, the officer didn't believe him. Pausch looked just too healthy. To prove it, Pausch pulled up his shirt and showed the officer his multiple surgery scars. The officer didn't know what to say, *but he didn't* give Pausch a speeding ticket. *The Truth Shall Set you Free!* Is what Pausch named this story. Truth – and no ticket! Pausch wanted to teach kids that you *can* be honest. Maybe *should* be honest, even in the little things. But most people are not particularly honest.

We spend our lives obfuscating and hiding behind walls and underneath rocks – anything to avoid telling the truth. *I just love* your haircut. *Those jeans definitely make you look skinny*. or – *you scare me*. Elephants in living rooms – and most people squeeze past the elephant dozens of times each day, anything to avoid talking about it. *I'm dying*, is all Pausch said – honest, and liberating. I've been with many people during the dying process, and I can tell you, those who were honest about – who *owned* – their impending deaths, died the happiest.

George Bernard Shaw fell off a ladder when he was 94 years old. His sister was nearby, and immediately tried to save him, but Shaw rejected her. *Sister*, he said, *you're trying to keep me alive as an old curiosity. But I'm done, I'm finished, I'm going to die*. Jesus said pretty much the same thing when he died: *It is finished*. These were three of Jesus' last eleven words. The other eight he spoke to the second criminal hanging on the cross next to his. This man, though a criminal, had changed. He had become honest – acknowledged for first time, perhaps, his own humanity, his own frailty, his own darkness. That he, like you and me, had done things he ought not to have done, and he had failed to do those things which he ought to have done. Turning to Jesus, he said simply, *Remember me when you come into your kingdom*.

We chant these same words on Maundy Thursday each year, the night before Good Friday, as a reminder not of Jesus' humanity, frailty or dark side, but of our own. It is a moment of brutal honesty, a raw appeal. *Remember me*, we cry in desperation, and don't you know, this truth shall set you free. Doesn't everybody want to be remembered? Pausch wrote The Last Lecture so his children would remember him. George Bernard Shaw wrote plays so the world would remember him. Even Jesus asked to be remembered – Eat this bread and drink this wine, *in remembrance of me*. So yes, this man like all of us wanted to be remembered – but Jesus gave him far more than he asked for. *Today you will be with me in Paradise. Paradiso*, a warm and gentle place of clean rivers and eternal hope. Life, not death! You will live, and not die, Jesus

ironically promised this man while they *both* hung on crosses, dying. Jesus understood what so few people get: truth instills life, even brutal truth.

Perhaps this is the realization Ann Boleyn came to right before she was executed. You remember Ann – she was Henry VIII's second wife. When Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, didn't produce for Henry a male heir, he had an affair with, and then married, Ann Boleyn. You see, Ann was complicit in Henry's misdeeds. Only, Ann like Catherine failed to birth a boy – but this time, Henry conspired to have Ann arrested and beheaded. In prison, the night before she was to die, Ann Boleyn reassured herself: *the executioner is, I believe, very expert, and my neck is very slender*. The next day, however, she spoke more humbly, more like the second criminal: *Oh God, have pity on my soul. Oh God, have pity on my soul*. Her words sound more religious than we are used to – but the point is nonetheless the same – To the extent she meant these words, Ann was now contrite, honest like the second criminal. And life – not death – springs from such honesty. God can do very little for the closed heart, but for the malleable, honest heart, well - truth will set you free.

But you see, the only person who stands outside of God's grace –is the one whose heart is stone. Black coal, impenetrable. God will try – over and over and over again – to reach inside that heart, but it is locked. And that, you see, is the rock that is so big God cannot pick it up. The one place outside of God's reach. And this is why – for grace, for yourself – honesty is so important. You want to be healed? You want to grow in faith and hope? You want to help those disaffected among you? You – yourself – must become honest. Soften your heart, and become malleable. Face your own darkness. Your own humanity and frailty. (so much is attributable to self-delusion)

Don't you know? The truth shall set you free.