

HOMILY
SERVICE OF WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION FOR RICHARD LEE SALES
BILTMORE CHURCH, ARDEN, NC

April 13, 2018

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Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going."⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

¹⁵ If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

"Trust me."

That's what he asked me to do.

But that can be hard to do, you know. Especially when you are worried, when you are afraid.

But he asked me to trust him.

It had been two days—and my children were getting impatient with me, even kind of angry—they thought I should be able to do something to fix the situation.

Because you see, it had been two whole days since our cat, for some reason, went up to the furthest reaches of the tallest tree on our farm. I kept thinking he would come down on his own, but I admit, I was starting to get worried myself.

“Please mom, call the fire department.”

So, I called Richard Sales.

“Richard, do people really call the Fire Department to come and get their cats out of trees?”

“They do,” he said, “they actually do.”

“Well, we’ve got a cat who has been up in a tree for two days. My kids are getting mad at me and wanted me to call the fire department, but I don’t want to bother you all with this!”

“I’ll come out there right now if you want me to, but I’ve never seen a cat skeleton up in a tree.”

“Trust me. That cat will come down eventually.”

And he was right. The cat eventually came down—and the fact that no one has ever seen a cat skeleton in a tree was just what I needed to hear, and what my kids needed to hear.

“Trust me.”

Those are the words that make human community possible—those are the words that make faith possible.

Jesus was saying the same thing—that last night with his friends in that upstairs room. He was saying the same thing: “trust me.”

His friends were worried, they were afraid. And between the twelve of them, they were playing out all the ways human beings react to stress—fight, flight, freeze. Denial, betrayal, disbelief. Confusion, anger, defensiveness.

In the Gospel of John, the last few chapters are Jesus’ farewell discourse—a beautiful and powerful series of words about trust and truth—and in the end, these words are really about how faith, how being a Jesus follower in this world, requires moral courage.

And that kind of courage—that kind of moral courage, is born out of trust—trust in God—that trust is the lifeblood of faith. It is the thread that weaves together family, community, culture.

When trust is broken—it is devastating to our spirits—broken trust inflicts deep wounds—and the work of trusting again is the excruciating work of believing in the world, in God, in other people, in yourself again.

So, when your path crosses with someone who is truly trustworthy—someone who truly has integrity, someone who you can trust with your vulnerability, with your fragility, with your hopes and fears and idiosyncrasies. When your life intersects with someone like that—it is a glimpse of something Holy, a taste of something so nourishing, so ennobling, so beautiful, that that person truly changes the world for you, the whole wide world.

Jesus says, if you love me you will do as I do—you will keep my commandments. I abide in you and you abide in me. Jesus is trustworthy. God is trustworthy. The Spirit is trustworthy.

And so those who profess to follow in Christ's way, must first trust Him, and must next be trustworthy—and not just any kind of trustworthy—the kind of trustworthy that is to life, that is to love, that is to healing.

Richard Sales was a faithful Jesus follower—and Richards Sales was trustworthy. I trusted him. You trusted him. We trusted him.

And God entrusted him with gifts that made him a messenger, a healer, a truth-teller, a bridge builder, a nurturer, a music maker, a problem solver, a community strengthener.

God entrusted him with gifts that made him a loving son, an attentive father, a loyal friend, a remarkable fire chief, a good steward of the earth, a joyful child of God.

It was an honor to be Richard Sales' pastor. Richard made Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church better, stronger, truer, more faithful—that's what he did for every community that he invested in.

Presbyterians are often known as the frozen chosen. I like to think that at Grace Covenant—we are in the process of thawing out. In our expression of our best selves, Presbyterians are about connection—and the Spirit moving in the body of Christ gathered together for sacred purpose.

Richard thrived in that way of being church—in the connections, in the conversations, in the mutual struggles, in the ways we strengthen each other when we tell the truth about ourselves, in the ways Christ can heal broken relationships, in the way communities who come together in Christ’s name can make the world a more trustworthy place.

We Presbyterians have a name for funerals and memorial services. We call them a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. And here we are right in the middle of the Easter season.

In fact, last time I saw Richard he was processing in with the choir for our second Easter service. He was this close to me as I waited to step into the processional behind the choir. Something made me playfully reach out and poke him—He look at me and I gave him a big “it’s Easter” smile. I am so glad I did—I got to see his smile one last time—and then he turned toward the cross with a serious kind of look on his face—his diligence and dutifulness were kicking in. It was Easter and he was going to sing that song with everything he had—no messing around, no half way.

And for just a few words of the song, we were there singing together “Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia, suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia.”

Richard trusted that truth—that truth of Christ’s power to redeem our loss. He trusted it and he wanted to sing it, and share it, and live out of that freedom.

When I saw Richard at Grace Covenant, I thought—if **he** calls this his church home, we must be doing something right. If he likes being here, I like being here. His moral courage helped me have moral courage.

His powerful testimony of staking his life on God’s love—so much so that he found the courage to tell the truth about who he really was, created space for others to tell the truth about themselves, too.

He trusted all of us with his truth—even those in his life who couldn’t understand it or didn’t know how to reconcile it with your beliefs—he trusted his relationships with all of you enough to say this is who I am—and I am going to be who I am right here—with all of you. What a gift to have someone trust us this way.

It is truly awe-inspiring how he navigated these different communities—look at us all here—this may be one of the most politically and theologically diverse gatherings the Asheville area has ever seen—Richard is our connection, he is helping to create and strengthen community even in death.

He challenges all of us to engage with each other as brothers and sisters—not as political opponents or as those whose theology or biblical interpretation is something we think is just dead wrong.

We needed Richard. The world needed Richard. And the world needs us to be more like Richard.

Richard knew how to love, to smile, he knew how to diffuse, and he knew that that love doesn't avoid hard truths or hard conversations, and he didn't apologize for who he was.

He never mistook the church for God—he was wise enough to know the difference between a human institution and the divine mystery, the powerful ocean of love that is, was, and always will be.

And Richard trusted in God's promises for him—he was a Jesus follower through and through—he trusted God so much that he believed God wanted him to be himself—he trusted God so much that he believed the way he lived mattered and that what others needed from him mattered.

And who he was, brothers and sisters, was a magnificent child of God, made in God's image, made to love and to live and to laugh, made to keep us safe, made to make us feel at home in the world, made to challenge us to see things from a different perspective, made to be right there when we needed him the most.

Laurel and Nathan, this throng of people is just a fraction of the love that surrounds you because of who your dad was—and because of who God is. Your dad loved you fiercely—and that kind of love doesn't die—because it is from God—and nothing can separate us from it. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the love that surrounds you, grounds you, fills you, and even protects you—not from hardship, not from pain or disappointment, but that love protects you from the lie that tries to tell you that you are alone, that love protects you from the lies the world can sometimes tell us about who God is and how God works.

Your dad was a good teacher—he showed you a lot of things in the way he lived. As your future unfolds, let the wisdom of who your dad was even in death teach you about who you are and who God is.

Your dad believed in the power of God to heal, to liberate, to overcome, to be our very present help in times of trouble. Your dad is a teacher now about the mystery and mercy of resurrection—my prayer is as your life proceeds from losing your dad that you will open up your broken hearts to the love that will never let you go—God's love will always find a way to stay connected, to invite each and every one of us to be who we were uniquely made to be, and to never, ever—never let death have the last word.

Friends, let us all resolve today to open our hearts as wide as Richard did—even our broken hearts, to the love of God that heals where we struggle to see anything but

brokenness, who breathes life where we can see nothing but death, who can make family of faith out of a gathering as unlikely as all of us here today, together, together praying, listening, holding each other gently, honoring, singing, blessing our brother Richard on his way with everything we've got.

Richard Lee Sales, we were not ready for you to go. But we entrust you to God's powerful and mysterious eternity—the home you trusted in. The home you are helping us trust in even now.

Fly away home now, my brother Richard, fly away home.

Thanks be God.