

Preached at Grace Church, Alexandria  
Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 25, 2014

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Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:7-8, 14-18

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

### *The Hope that is in you*

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you."

When I was in seminary, there was a topic we sometimes discussed. Often in hushed tones. In fact, the very word we discussed had a nickname to express how we were made nervous by the topic and perhaps longed to avoid it! We called it: "the E-word". Do you know what it was?

The word was *Evangelism*. It's a word that perhaps makes some of us nervous. Perhaps it makes us think of standing on street corners on soap boxes or of going and knocking on strangers' doors to talk to them about their relationship with Jesus Christ. Perhaps you think that's not a good idea. Perhaps you kind of think it is, but are nervous about actually doing that.

In any case, Evangelism is a word, an idea, and an action that many of us may try not to think about too much. And it may be something that we think we are not gifted at, or not equipped to do.

But today in the first Letter of Peter, St. Peter gives us a little tool for evangelism, and I think it's about the most helpful tip we can have about the whole - perhaps rather intimidating - subject.

He says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you."

I think this is the most useful place any of us can start when we are considering the possibility of sharing something of the Good News of Jesus Christ with someone who does not know it. Giving an account of the *hope* that is in you.

And not only is it a useful place to start - I think it is one of the most effective ways to share the Gospel or invite someone to begin or deepen their own relationship with God - by offering this kind of personal witness.

Just last week at the 9am service, and for all of us on Easter Sunday, we renewed our baptismal vows and promised, with God's help, to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."

And so what if someone *asks us*? What if someone actually "demands an account of the hope that is in you"? Not necessarily in an aggressive, demanding kind of way. But these questions might actually come up. Someone might say:

"You call yourself a Christian? What is that all about?"

Or, "So what actually happened on Easter?" (or Good Friday, or many other days)

Or, "Why do you go to church on Sunday?" - I find that one, or a variation on it, particularly likely because it seems a little less of a personal question, or a little easier to ask, since it sidesteps the awkward subject of whether you have a relationship with God.

The question is often hiding inside other questions or comments as well. A lot of conversation that you might have with friends or family dances around this topic. When people talk about trying to find meaningful work, or find purpose in life, there is often an underlying question about what or Who, makes life meaningful - why we "are put on this Earth".

So can we answer any of these questions? How would you do it?

I was once in a class that prepared people for baptism, confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation. And one of the final days of the class was on the E-word - it was about Evangelism. And on that day we were asked to prepare an "elevator speech" on the Gospel.

I was familiar with the concept of an "elevator speech" from the world of job search and job development. This is where you have some basic points in mind to deliver on the spot if you find yourself in the position of being asked about your qualifications for a job, or someone expresses interest in the company you work for and you need to be able to briefly explain it. This might be some kind of career or business opportunity. The idea behind the term is this hypothetical situation: if someone were to actually ask you some such question in an elevator or some other brief encounter, could you give a quick accounting of yourself or your company before the door opened again?

I think this is a fantastic exercise when we think about our own faith. People do ask quick, sudden questions about religion sometimes, and they may really not want a 10 minute lecture on theology. (I know, because sometimes I have fallen into offering them one!) But they may very much want some answer.

But not only is an “elevator speech” about faith potentially useful to someone who is a little curious or searching. Not only is it potentially a powerful witness and invitation to encounter God, or learn about Jesus Christ, or even join the Church.

The elevator speech, even if you rarely or never quite give it is also useful for your own sense of your faith. When you have to simplify things down to a few points, really a few sentences, it helps you see what the core of your own faith is. It helps you understand the nature of your own relationship with God. And that could help you have some kind of conversation about faith with others, as well.

Our elevator speeches would not all be exactly the same. They might hold common themes about the love of God, the life and resurrection of Christ, the call to service and love of neighbor. But our own particular reasons for coming to Church, for falling in love with God, are not identical. And so it’s interesting, and actually I think fun, to try to come up with a few points, and see what it might teach you about your own understanding of God and your life of faith.

If you could only say a few sentences about why you are a Christian, what would you make sure to mention?

Would you mention a personal conviction or sense of God’s presence or God’s love for you?

Or maybe point to the story of God being born on Earth as a human as a sign and proof of God’s love?

Would you perhaps mention or refer to some particular moment in your life when you really felt the presence of God? That kind of personal witness can be one of the most compelling things to say.

Would you talk about how being a Christian has changed or shaped your life? Would you say something about the priorities it has given you? Priorities like service to others, or living in a spirit of thankfulness, or finding strength and comfort in the belief that God is watching over you or has a plan for you?

Would you say something about resurrection? About how Jesus' rising from the dead is a victory over death? How it gives you hope that death is not the end of the story of our lives. How it is a sign that forces of violence, sin, and destruction are not as powerful as the power of love?

Would you say something about God's forgiveness, and how this offer of forgiveness has set you free from the mistakes or wounds of your past?

Would you talk about the Church? Would you say something about the joy of community that you find in your parish family? Would you talk about how we care for each other, and how you have experienced that as a way of receiving and experiencing the love of God?

Would you talk about worship, and a feeling of transcendence that can come in prayer, or liturgy, or music, that lifts you out of yourself and makes you believe that there is something in this world greater than yourself? Would you speak about the power of an encounter with God in the Eucharist, or in baptism?

These are just a couple possibilities. Some may speak to you more than others. Some may make you go - "Yes! That's the heart of the matter for me!" I invite you to take a couple minutes, today or sometime this week, and write down some main points. What is it that is at the heart of your faith, what is it that draws you to a belief in God and a love for God? If you actually write it down, or say it to another person, it might just stick in your heart or mind a bit, and make you ready to give an account some day of the hope that is in you. Hey - this could be great coffee hour conversation!

And I think it's useful, to be a little concrete about this. I've suggested some possibilities, and offered some questions, but if you will allow me a moment of personal witness, let me offer you an example of what I might say in an "elevator speech". This is not a script I've memorized, it's not necessarily exactly what I would say any time I'm asked - that also depends on the question that brings it up and the person I'm talking to and where I think my faith might intersect with theirs. But here's an example, to give you an idea.

I am a Christian because I have fallen in love with the story of Jesus Christ. The story of God choosing to become a human amazes me because it convinces me how much God loves and values every human life. I'm a Christian because I have had moments where I was overwhelmed by the sense of the Presence of God with me, and many of those moments I have experienced in Christian worship and especially in encountering God in Holy Communion. I am a Christian because I feel called to be a sign to the world of the Love of God that I have experienced, and because the story of Jesus' life and death and rising from the dead has so filled my heart with love and hope that I want to share it with everyone who longs for and needs that love and hope in their own hearts as well.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard this morning, Paul speaks of the human search for God, how we "search for God and perhaps grope for Him, and find Him - indeed He is not far from us." If you are searching and groping today, I pray that you might come to know just how near God is to you. And if you feel that you have found Him, I pray that you might help and invite and love those who are searching now. For in truth, He is not far from any of us.

Amen.

