

## Elevator Evangelism at Evangelism Matters

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(Underlined content corresponds to a PowerPoint slide.)

#### Starbucks Sleeve

A few years ago Oprah wrote sayings for Starbucks to put on their coffee sleeves. They were short sayings that are pure “Oprah,” and were meant to generate thought and contemplation in people as they walked away with their coffee. A seminary friend of mine (who is now a bishop), posted a picture of one of these sleeves on his Facebook a few years ago, and he asked people: “If you could put a life message on a Starbucks sleeve, what would it be?”

- I was surprised at the answers. Most of them were posted by clergy or very faithful lay leaders in the church.
- Yet only a handful spoke openly about God or Jesus.
- The chance to have your words read by millions of people (think of the Starbucks audience) and a missed opportunity to testify. (Luke 21:13)
- It’s not even threatening—you don’t have to say it in person, it’s printed on a sleeve. And most of the people who pick it up will have no idea who you are. They will only read your words.

So if you got the opportunity to put something on a Starbucks sleeve, what would say? How could you use that opportunity to testify?

If sharing the gospel is not “optional” and not only in deed, but also in word (Baptismal Covenant).

- The word and deed go hand in hand. Just because some people’s form of sharing in word is heavy-handed or coercive doesn’t mean the whole act of talking about Jesus is wrong or bad. It is good news, and if there’s something our world needs, it’s the hope that comes from good news.
- I tend to agree with our Presiding Bishop – who really could lead this session in his sleep – that we should be doing evangelism as well, as often, as authentically as we do outreach.”

In seminary we had to do this big exercise for homiletics that originated from a little verse in 1Peter 3:15. It was an exercise in exploring for ourselves what the Good News means to/for us. It is such a fundamentally simple thing to do, such a fundamentally simple thing to consider and know about ourselves and our faith, yet most people in The Episcopal Church do not even think about it. My wife, Melody, actually had to do the exercise twice in successive semesters, and overcame her initial frustration when she realized that what she had to say had grown and changed and matured. Her hope was grounded in the same truth, but the passing of time meant that it was not the same. More about that later.

A few years ago that reading came up in the lectionary (Easter 6A), and I felt compelled to talk about it in my sermon and in the adult ed that day. Around that time I began to connect the idea of evangelism with the idea of the elevator speech. A short, straightforward, compelling pitch you could make in the roughly 30 seconds it takes to ride up or down all the floors. In the entrepreneurial world it is the nickname given to the pitch you’d make to the CEO, if you had a big idea. You only have a short opportunity to boil down something huge, perhaps something

you've spent years of your life creating, into a few sentences. Entrepreneurs hone their elevator speeches, knowing that they have to make it count when/if they ever get a shot to make a big impression.

Well, the world is full of elevators. They're in coffee shops and on the sidelines of soccer games and in hospital rooms. My elevator tends to be on airplanes (something about my countenance seems to communicate, "Talk to me. Tell me your problems.") A friend and classmate from seminary who graduated the year before me came back the next year to talk to our class about what it's like "on the other side," and he told a hilarious story about a woman who approached him in the grocery store and urgently sought his help selecting a salad dressing, and then an aisle later asked him for a blessing.

They're anywhere that we are presented with an opportunity to present the hope that is within us, to share the good news of God in Christ in word as much as deed. They are anywhere that we can tell what we believe in such a way that we plant a living seed for God to nurture and water and grow.

I wonder where you experience elevators?

My first exposure to an elevator speech was when I was a sophomore in college and I was asked to lunch by a missionary with Campus Crusade. What I remember most of that encounter is how familiar he was with his own story, and the confidence and ease with he told it. He knew what he believed, why it mattered, and why it might matter to me, too. He was not pushy or condescending or coercive. He was quite polite and respectful, but he was also clear about what he believed and why it was important. The whole experience was inspiring and challenging to me, but not necessarily in the way he may have hoped. It started the long process of reflecting on what I believe is essential. What is essential about the Christian faith for me? What do I think is essential for others? What is the meaning and purpose of the Gospel? What is the Good News, boiled down to something I could tell another person over lunch, over coffee, or even in an elevator?

I think elevator evangelism is a big deal. We need to know what we believe, and we need to be able to evangelize – to tell our boiled down, essential summary of the hope that is within us – in a short window of time. We need to work on this art form, because we need to know what we would say, not as a tool for converting others, but as a tool for reaffirming what we believe and why. And then we need to work on it; we need to practice it with one another, like an entrepreneur practicing for their big moment with the CEO. And then we need to be on the lookout for elevators.

## What makes for a good elevator speech

1. Personal and sincere
2. Simple
3. Open-ended, invitational; leave them interested and wanting more (humorous, provocative, clever, unique)

### 1. Personal and sincere

- "I was a knucklehead."
- "Once I was gripped by the choke of depression and now I over time have experienced healing and joy I never knew."
- The sincerity piece is connected to the 1Peter passage: the hope that is within you. It has to be true for you, connected to your idea and understanding and belief.

### 2. Simple

- You can't say everything, and you shouldn't try. We get incapacitated by our desire to tell our whole story, or to explain everything, or to apologize for everything. And later there is time to do that. But the premise of the elevator speech is to introduce the idea. To say too much is to actually become less effective.
- Mike's formula: tell them what your life was like before Jesus, what your life is like after, and how you believe that change occurred.
- In a FB post back in December, that built on some comments he'd made to a group of journalists earlier in the week, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said, "I'm a Christian because Jesus Christ found me and called me, around 40 years ago. I'm a Christian because it makes sense to me, because Jesus rose from the dead - he conquered death and sin and suffering. I'm a Christian because in Jesus I see the God who didn't say, "This is how you lot have got to behave, and I'm going to watch you and judge you." Instead he came alongside us and lived in the middle of the absolute foulest mess, and died unjustly young in great agony, and bore all that was wrong in this world on his shoulders. I'm a Christian because in my own experience I've run away and God has met me and yet not been angry with me. When I've failed he's picked me up and healed and strengthened me. That's why I'm a Christian. And that's why, whatever happens, whatever stupid mistakes, I know that even at the end of it all, even if everything else fails, God doesn't — and he will not fail even to the end of my life."

### 3. Open-ended and not a closed-loop

- "God's mercy, grace, and love are *scandalous*"
- "Let's get coffee."
- The goal is to open the door to more conversation, not simply to "dump" your ideas and opinions on another person.
- Momastery's success is that it leads to conversation. It's an example of elevator speeches on social media, which are rare in my experience. She talks about things in a way that invites a response. "I cry every time I read her things," my wife says.
- Presiding Bishop – excerpt from sermon
  - I am more and more convinced that God came among us in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth to show us the way to be reconciled with the God who deeply and passionately loves each and every one of us, to be reconciled and right with that God and to be reconciled and right with each other as the children of that one God who created us all. He came to show us how to get right and how to get

reconciled. He came to show us therefore how to become more than simply the human race – that’s not good enough – came to show us how to be more than a collection of individualized self-interests, came to show us how to become more than a human race. He came to show us how to become the human family of God. And in that, my friends, is our hope and our salvation, now and unto the day of eternity.

There are two other elements of good elevator speeches, as far as I can tell:

### Contextual

- Paul’s story as a model; given in various ways (Acts 22; Galatians 1; – reminder that telling our story adapts to our context (different elevator, different day, different passengers)
- And also that our story may evolve over time

They Require Practice – The day you give your elevator evangelistic speech shouldn’t be the first time you’ve ever thought about it or said it out loud.

- Take 10 minutes to do some elevator speech sharing/practicing with those around you.
- Don’t panic. Have a bit of fun.
- Think of what is essential about your Christian faith and try to share it.
- Three rounds in pairs
  - Round 1: each person take 3 minutes
  - Debrief: what was it like? What worked? What was hard? How did it feel?
  - Round 2: each person take 2 minutes
  - Debrief: what was different? How was it easier? How was it harder?
  - Round 3: each person take 1 minute
  - Debrief: What have you had to eliminate to get it to 1 minute?

How to practice

- Lectionary possibilities for using this in sermon time
  - First Sunday after Epiphany A – Acts 10:34-43 (“we are witnesses of all he did...”)
  - Second Sunday after Epiphany A – John 1:29-42 (“Come and see...We have found the Messiah.”)
  - Fifth Sunday after Epiphany A – Matthew 5:13-20 (“You are the light of the world...no one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket”)
  - Ascension Day – Acts 1:8 (“You will be my witnesses”)
  - Easter 6A – 1Peter 3:15 (“Be prepared to share the hope that is within you”)
  - Proper 4A – Romans 1:16 (“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God”)
- Series on sharing our witness
- Formation for Vestry