

High-Ceiling Thinking *John 11:1-45* | 11/4/2018

A university professor was in an airport, waiting for her plane to be called when her mind took off on a flight of its own. The professor was Joan Meyers-Levy, and she teaches at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management. There in the airport, Meyers-Levy was conscious of being in a reasonably open space with high ceilings, but it occurred to her that she would soon be entering a cramped space with low ceilings — the airplane. That started her wondering whether ceiling heights could have any effect on how we think about things.

She took that question home with her and decided to try to find an answer. At the university, she conducted a series of tests in which she had students perform various tasks on a laptop computer — some in a room with a 10-foot ceiling and some in a room identical in every way except that the ceiling was two feet lower. What she discovered was that students in the higher-ceiling room consistently did well on tasks where they had to envision the relationships between things, while students in the lower-ceiling room performed better on detail-oriented work. The professor explains the results this way:

With the higher ceiling heights, what seems to happen is that people subconsciously get a sense of freedom from the spaciousness of the room. And in lower ceilings, we are activating thoughts related to a sense of confinement, or some kind of limitation. And these thoughts shape the kind of processing we do.

In terms of Meyers-Levy's field of specialty — business management — the study suggests that it could be helpful to put people in workspaces with different ceiling heights depending on their responsibilities. People who need to focus on detail, like computer programmers, accountants and data-entry personnel, should be assigned to the lower-ceiling work areas, while those who need to do goal-setting, plan strategies, come up with innovative concepts or in other ways see the bigger picture should get the higher-ceiling spaces.

What does this have to do with John 11? Since we're speaking about low-ceilings that impart a sense of confinement, the tomb of Lazarus definitely comes into play. It's the burial chamber where Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, has been interred. Verse 38 describes the tomb as a cave, with a stone "lying against it" (that is, sealing the entryway). Whether it was a naturally occurring cave or a cavity hewn out of the rock, we don't know, for both types were used for burials in those days, but, in either case, these chambers often were the repositories for *several* bodies. The bodies were laid on shelves hacked out of the walls, one above the other. This means that each body was in a space with almost no head room, let alone a cathedral ceiling. Pretty much like riding in a New York City subway car at five on Friday afternoon.

But then, when you are dead, none of that much matters, does it? Death itself is the ultimate "low-ceiling" problem, the final confinement, the decisive cessation of all that was vital in the individual.

Tombs are okay dwellings for the dead, but if you are alive, they are no place to linger. And that's why, in the gospel account, Jesus called for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Jesus was enabling Lazarus to rejoin the living, so he called Lazarus to come out of his low-ceiling abode and stand under the high firmament of God's sky.

Of course, *we don't have to actually die to get stuck under a low ceiling in this life*. Life is hard, and we can get so bogged down in the day-to-day routine of making a living, paying the bills, dealing with stuff that breaks, trying to keep up with the demands others place upon us and so on, that we feel as if we don't have time for much *high-ceiling thinking*.

And that's too bad, because, although it's necessary and important that we handle that commonplace stuff, it can demand so much attention that we get drawn into low-ceiling perspectives on life itself — low-ceiling perspectives such as:

- the notion that the limited view of life we see is all that there is;
- the assumption that we should satisfy ourselves in whatever way we can because “you only go around once”;
- the idea that individuals don’t matter in the overall scheme of things;
- the belief that “when our number’s up, it’s all over”; the belief that nothing much ever really changes.

Against all of that, Jesus comes along and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” That’s **high-ceiling thinking!**

Jesus clearly had a “Think outside of the grave” mentality. Jesus calls *us* to a higher level of life, to leave behind low-ceiling, inside the box, inside the grave perspectives.

There’s no better context to experience and implement this kind of radical thinking than in and through the church.

When it comes to high- and low-ceiling vision, it is not an either-or matter. In almost any endeavor in this world, we need both the people who work at the low-ceiling, detail-oriented tasks, and we need those who think more globally and long-range. But in the church, and in our lives in general, no matter which ceiling type is our personal forte, we need to not lose sight of the big picture.

Consider, for example, the Church Under the Bridge, in Waco, Texas. This “congregation” meets — under a bridge, an Interstate bridge running north and south through Waco!

In 1992, a Christian couple from Waco and a Baylor student spent some time getting to know several of the homeless men sleeping under the Interstate 35 bridge. Over the next few months, the men accepted the invitation to meet for Bible study on Sunday mornings at the bridge. Over the weeks and months, the small group grew to include more homeless folks, other lower-income people and local community persons who either had no church experience or felt like they did not fit in at other local churches. Many of the basic needs of the lower-income and homeless were met through the shared resources available. Within a couple of years, the Bible study group realized God was doing something more than just a Bible study. Thus, Church Under the Bridge acknowledged its existence and began taking on more responsibilities as the body of Christ.

In 1998, the church realized its need to establish its vision statement, core values and basic leadership structure. The Covenant Community was created for those who sensed God’s leadership and call to this particular church. Those interested in being a part of the decision making and servant leadership were asked to complete six weeks of foundational class and become active in a small group of the church.

Church Under the Bridge attempts to avoid denomination, cultural, economic or racial distinctions. They welcome folks from wide and diverse backgrounds to love God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with all their heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbors as themselves.

“Lazarus, come out,” Jesus called, telling him and his sisters and, really, all of us who follow him, not to think that the restrictions of low-ceiling places are the whole story.

Our churches need to escape low-ceiling thinking. Jesus calls *us* to “come forth.”

It is so easy to get lost in the world of the everyday. We need to respond when we hear Jesus’ call to come forth, so that we see afresh the larger meaning of this life, and find ourselves again.

Pastor Keith