

High Ceiling Thinking
John 11:1-45
February 25, 2015 (The Source)

A university professor (Joan Meyers-Levy; University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management) was waiting to board her airplane. As she wandered around the airport terminal, she was aware of open space and high ceilings. When she boarded her airplane, she was aware of a cramped space with low ceilings. She began to think about whether ceiling heights had any effect on how we think about things.

Being the professor that she was, she decided to find the answer. At the university, she conducted a series of tests in which she had students perform various tasks on a laptop computer. Some students were in a room with 10-foot ceilings and some were in a room with a ceiling height of 8 feet. The two rooms were identical in every other aspect.

Here is what she found: Students in higher-ceiling rooms consistently did well on tasks where they had to envision the relationships between things. Students in low-ceiling rooms performed better at detailed-orientated work. She explained 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.

If you apply this to the business world, people who need to focus on detail, such as computer programmers, accountants and data-entry personnel, should be assigned to lower-ceiling work. Those who need to do goal setting, plan strategies, come up with innovative concepts or see the bigger picture, they should get higher-ceiling spaces.

Our scripture passage today is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. You could say Lazarus was confined in a low ceiling area (The bodies were in a large tomb, but were laid on shelves hacked out of the walls, one above the other). But, when you are dead, it doesn't matter.

Our story is about high-ceiling thinking. Jesus knew what he was going to do when he heard about Lazarus' illness. However, when he had conversations with various people, he tested them. He wanted to see if they had low-ceiling thinking or high ceiling thinking.

In other words, could they think outside the grave? He was calling them to think in ways that they had never thought before. Everyone was focused on the grave, but because of the presence of Jesus, could something happen outside of their line of thinking? As we say, "Think outside the box." Or, to have high ceiling thinking.

Let's take a look at each character that Jesus "interviews," and I want you to help determine if that character had low-ceiling thinking or high-ceiling thinking. Were they soaring or stuck on the details of the grave?

The Disciples.

Read verses 1-8

Disciples: Low or high ceiling thinking?

Jesus is demonstrating high ceiling thinking by saying this illness is for the glory of God. Disciples demonstrate low ceiling: thinking of the details of Jesus' safety.

Thomas

Read verses 14-16

Low ceiling or high?

Yep, very low. Worried about details - if Jesus is not safe, neither are they.

Martha

Read verses 20-27

Low or high?

I think pretty high ceiling thinking. She demonstrates that if Jesus had been present when Lazarus was alive, Lazarus would be alive today. Then Jesus pushes her thinking further. Jesus tells her basically what he is about to do (very high ceiling thinking! He is thinking outside the grave...literally), but her mind doesn't go as high as Jesus' (maybe I should stop and say: who of us can?). She thinks Jesus is speaking about the resurrection in the last days (a common Jewish belief at the time).

Then Jesus goes even higher: I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." He turns to Martha and asks, "Do you believe this?"

Even though she doesn't fully comprehend what he is saying, she trusts him, and tries to express her belief as best as she can (verse 27.) I believe you are the Christ who has come into the world.

She does a pretty good job with high-ceiling thinking!

Mary

Mary hears that Jesus has arrived and runs out to meet him.

Verse 32

What kind of ceiling thinking for Mary?

She says the same thing that Martha said back in verse 21. She, too, knows that Jesus could have healed Lazarus while alive. Moderate-ceiling thinking.

Unknown people

Read verse 37

What do you think? Some bitterness here. Much grief. At this point, low-ceiling thinking.

Back to Martha

Verse 39

Martha is back to low ceiling thinking – at least compared to what she said earlier (“I know God will give you whatever you ask of him.”)

But that doesn't stop Jesus from doing what he did. Read verses 40 -42 to find out why Jesus did what he did.

He did it for God's glory and that people would believe in him.

This is what happened: Read verse 45

That's what many people did do – believe in him (high ceiling thinking).

But there were others reactions as well. Read verse 53: “So from that day on they planned to put him to death.” He scared people and angered them. Very low ceiling thinking! Can't accept what God is doing; can't accept high ceiling thinking.

High ceiling thinking – and doing! - can be dangerous. High ceiling thinking is going with Jesus wherever he takes you.

Think of the church: there are people who have a vision of where their church should go for the future. They have high ceiling thinking. But others in the church pull them back and say, “No! We must keep doing what we have always done.” Low ceiling thinking.

Back in the days of old-fashioned traveling circuses, animals were not always cared for in a humane fashion. In the case of one particularly impoverished circus, the animals were kept in tiny cages.

One bear, in particular, lived in a nine-foot-by-nine-foot cage. He was never let out. His purpose was simply to sit there in his cage, near the entrance to the fairgrounds where the circus was performing. He was a sort of living billboard.

The circus eventually went bankrupt, and the animals dispersed to various zoos. The bear was sent to a wonderful zoo, one where the animals' quarters resembled their natural habitat. There were no cages in this zoo. There were barriers, of course, to protect zoo patrons from the animals, but they were unobtrusive and blended into the natural surroundings.

This unfortunate bear had been in his cage too long. Even though he was free to wander the large, vegetation-filled enclosure, he never ventured beyond a nine-foot-by-nine-foot area.

This bear had a low ceiling problem.

May we not be like that bear. Jesus calls us to high ceiling thinking. Lent and Easter remind us to think outside the grave as we follow Jesus.

People, come forth!