

High Ceiling Faith

John 11:1-45

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Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

There was a university professor who was waiting in the airport for a flight when she noticed how high the ceilings were. Being conscious of being in a reasonably open space with high ceilings, 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 this question home with her and started some experiments. 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 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 the 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 this study, it would be more 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 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.

Low Ceiling Tomb

What does all of this has to do with John 11 and Lazarus? After Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus died, he was interred in a cave tomb. Whether it was a naturally occurring cave or a cavity hewn out of the rock, this tomb had low ceilings.

When one is dead, it doesn't matter whether the tomb is roomy or spacious. Death itself is the ultimate "low-ceiling" problem, the final confinement, the decisive cessation of all that was vital in the individual and frankly; it's a low state of affair.

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

Now, none of us have to actually die to find ourselves stuck under a low ceiling life. Some people like those "life is good" t-shirts but we all know that life is hard. We get so bogged down in the day-to-day routine of making a living, paying the bills, mowing the lawn, dealing with the usual stuff that goes awry, trying to keep up with the demands others place upon us and so on, that we feel as if we are in a low-ceiling life. All of these things are closing in on us. We don't have time to think about what's it like to have a high-ceiling life!

I know it's necessary to handle the commonplace things like fixing the broken windows or cleaning up the church but these demands can command so much attention from us that we develop this low-ceiling perspective. For instance, we have this notion that what we can see is all there is in life—we have a limited view. We make this assumption that we should always satisfy ourselves in whatever way we can because we live life only once. We have this idea that in the overall scheme of things, individuals don't really matter. We believe that when our number's up, it's all over. We find ourselves saying, "What is it." We have a cynical idea of the world that nothing ever really changes. It doesn't matter who's in the White House; all politicians are the same. You get what I'm saying. This is low-ceiling thinking.

Against all of this low-ceiling thinking, Jesus comes along and says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." This is high-ceiling thinking! You can't get much higher than this!

Jesus is High and Low

We tend to refer to John 11 as a story about Lazarus. But notice that this is as much as Jesus' story too. Even Jesus feels the heartbreak of grief when his friend Lazarus dies. "Jesus began to weep," says verse 35 and it's the Bible's shortest verse, perhaps because there are no simple words to describe pain this deep. When death comes, there is nothing you can say. There are only oceans of pain to feel. Jesus, because he is human, feels it too. Jesus gets very low with us.

Of course, Jesus is also God. So in this story, there is a resurrection, a divine summoning of the dead man to come out of his tomb. Lazarus rises from the dead, and his sisters' prayers are answered. This is not something the human Jesus could ever do; this is the power of God-in-Jesus at work. Jesus is very high from us too.

In John 11, we see the example of Jesus' human and divine sides at work, simultaneously, on our behalf. Weeping, yet raising. Coming to us, yet removed from us. Calling us out of our low ceiling tombs to come out to the high and expansive sky of the living. John 11:41 reads, "Jesus looked upward and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'"

Knowing that Jesus is not only high in thinking with God and low in understanding how hard life is as human, he understands us when we are up to our ears with the burdens of life. He's with us when that ceiling is closing down on us. While this is all true and that there are times when we need to do some low-ceiling thinking, Jesus calls us to the possibilities of high-ceiling thinking. Jesus clearly wanted Martha and Mary to stop thinking about a low-ceiling tomb and believe in thinking outside of the grave.

High-Ceiling Church

There's no better context to experience and implement this kind of radical thinking than in and through the church. One congregation took this kind of thinking to heart. Recently they reviewed their mission statement, which included some ambitious aims in keeping with the Great Commission. But this congregation is in a rural, no-growth area, and its membership is gradually shrinking. So someone at the meeting suggested that the mission statement should be revised to say, "We will become the best small church that we can be."

It's unlikely that this person was thinking in terms of low ceilings at the time, but do you see what the effect of such a mission statement could be? It may sound realistic, but it lowers the expectations, lowers the goals, and gets the congregation focused more on the day-to-day details of being a church with a limited mission instead of thinking how it can accomplish the larger vision.

Thankfully, there were other people in the meeting who sensed the problem with that suggestion, and it was not adopted. We not only have to start thinking outside of the grave but also outside of the little box that we are so comfortable in!

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 must not lose sight of the big picture.

Remember the saying, "If you think you can't, you can't." If we say something is impossible in our lives, we have blocked the possible from ever happening. To achieve great things, we need to think big, and not limit what we or God might do. It's high-ceiling thinking. And when we see this as a faith matter, then it's high-ceiling faith that we are after. Faith is more than just positive mental attitude; it is a confidence that God is love and life, hope and joy, promises and possibilities and if we set our sights on God's purposes, amazing things can happen. Having a high-ceiling faith is to remain open to the possibility that God will intervene.

Are you living a low-ceiling life and missing out of the possibility of having a high-ceiling faith in God?

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 or maybe the zoo animals from the patrons, 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.

When it comes to our church, are we simply just the best medium size church located on the corner of Waverly Place and Sacramento Street? Or are we able to look upward with the expanse of God's wonderful world and see possibilities for new ministries and ventures in a high-ceiling faith?

Unbinding to Free

Did you notice that resurrection is not the last act in this story? The last act is unbinding and God gives it to us to do on behalf of one another. Jesus says, "Unbind him, and let him go." God raises the dead, but we are the ones who have to unbind them.

No one goes willingly into a low-ceiling tomb. The community puts you there when you are dead. The community wraps you with strips of cloth, swaddling you with layers and layers of bandages. This is absolutely fitting, if you are dead. But if you are alive, or if you are miraculously raised, then these bandages are problematic. No one can move if they are bound head to toe with strips of cloth. No one can be free if they are swaddled in layers of bandages.

Jesus does God's work of resurrection, but he tells the mourners to do their part by unbinding Lazarus and letting him go.

How many resurrections of newly baptized church members have you witnessed that have failed, ultimately, because the community did not help the resurrected ones to undo all of those bandages of doubts and questions they still had?

How many times have you seen a miraculous recovery turn into a relapse, because the community didn't do its part to let the recovering one "go free" of the old patterns and habits that kept him in bondage?

How many mourners have you met who rather enjoy the task of mourning at their loved ones' tombs, because the community didn't come to the aid of unbinding the weight of grief and setting them free?

There is nothing more tragic than a miraculously resurrected human being—one who has been touched by the divine grace and power of God—who trips and suffocates on her own bandages. And in the church, we see this: people eager to come out of their low-ceiling tombs, yet unable to move.

You and I need to escape from this low-ceiling thinking and low-ceiling life to experience the high-ceiling life in Jesus Christ. While we may need to do some low-ceiling thinking for our daily chores, God is ultimately calling us to a high-ceiling faith. A high-ceiling faith knows no bounds or confinement. It sees amazing possibilities and promises. It moves stones that stand in front of tombs. Jesus calls us to "come forth" out of our low-ceiling tombs and trust God with our new life. We need each other to unbind the bandages that keep us sad and discouraged so that we may go out to unbind all the Lazaruses in the world.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, something about you loves to mock death and to raise the dead. Something about you shows a power even over powerful death. Something about you frightens us, we who so easily adapt and adjust to the low-ceiling status quo as they are. Raise us from the dead, Lord Jesus! Bring us forth from death to life from a debilitating low-ceiling thinking to the high-ceiling faith so that we may see the possibilities and promises that come from a resurrected life. In Christ, we pray. Amen.