Q&A

with *Imaginary Jesus* author Matt Mikalatos

*Imaginary Jesus* is a hilarious, fast-paced, not-quite-fictional story that’s unlike anything you’ve ever read before. When Matt Mikalatos realizes that his longtime buddy in the robe and sandals isn’t the real Jesus at all, but an imaginary one, he embarks on a mission to find the real thing. On his wild ride through time, space, and Portland, Oregon, he encounters hundreds of other imaginary Jesuses determined to stand in his way (like Legalist Jesus, Perpetually Angry Jesus, and Magic 8 Ball Jesus). But Matt won’t stop until he finds the real Jesus—and finally gets an answer to the question that’s haunted him for years.

Q: Define an “imaginary Jesus.” Where do they come from?

A: An imaginary Jesus is a misconception or misrepresentation of Jesus we interact with in our own lives. They can come from a lot of places: from our own misunderstandings of Scripture, from our preferences, from theological errors we’ve been taught, or purely from a desire to have Jesus fit into our lives more conveniently. Sometimes an imaginary Jesus can even come from a good doctrinal position that has been overemphasized to become the “main characteristic” of Jesus rather than a piece of who he is.
Q: This book is a “sort-of-true” story. Answer true or false to the following questions.

1. Your name, like the lead character’s, really is Matt Mikalatos. TRUE! Technically Matthew.

2. You describe real events from your life and faith journey. Also TRUE!

3. You have really traveled to first-century Judea with a talking donkey. Trick question! I don’t answer trick questions.

So, the real question: Why did you choose to star in your own novel?

A: A lot of the themes I deal with in Imaginary Jesus are intensely personal, and I had the choice either to invent a fictional person who dealt with the same themes or to eliminate all that work by inserting myself into the story. Actually, the book started as personal essays, and in talking with my agent, Wes Yoder, we decided it needed a stronger narrative. As we talked about what that might look like, I was reminded of Dante’s Divine Comedy, where Dante is the main character and has a series of guides who walk him through a spiritual landscape. So I like to compare Imaginary Jesus to Dante’s Divine Comedy. Because it makes me sound real smart.
Q: In the book, the character Matt Mikalatos is a Christian. Yet he is accompanied by an imaginary Jesus. Isn’t that a contradiction?

A: I don’t think so. First John 3 tells us that when Christ appears we will be like him because we will see him as he really is. Which implies that we don’t know him completely now. So on this side of heaven we’re constantly growing in our knowledge of him. We all have misconceptions of who he is and places where we’re getting to know him better. In fact, the most troubling response I’ve gotten to the book has been when people tell me, “I don’t have an imaginary Jesus at all.”

Q: Magic 8 Ball Jesus, who only answers questions with one of several stock answers (“It is certain!” “Ask again later!”), is already a favorite with readers. Are there any imaginary Jesuses that have shown up more than others in your own life?

A: I’ve been surprised by how many people love Magic 8 Ball Jesus. He’s definitely the number one beloved representation of Jesus I hear about. For me personally, Legalist Jesus has been a lifelong problem. He has often snuck into my life, and sometimes when I’ve thought I had dealt with him, he shows up again in a different way. When I was single, there was a Jesus who was completely preoccupied with who I would one day marry. He spent a lot of time fretting over whether I was with the right girl or not. And the sort of mainstream Christian culture
Jesus (who I think of as Hollywood Jesus, based on all the Easter movies I’ve seen) has this way of being a default Jesus—the mild-mannered nice guy who never raises his voice and always has that knowing twinkle in his eye.

Q: In the book, Matt desperately wants to know why God allowed something terrible to happen to him and his wife. Why is hearing the real Jesus’ answer to this question so important?

A: In a lot of ways the entire book is structured around the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The first questions we come to in times of loss are “Is God really good?” and “Is God really powerful?” because it seems that if God really loves us and he is truly good and truly powerful, then he wouldn’t allow this to happen. I see this summed up in Mary and Martha’s question to Jesus: “Where were you? If you had been here, our brother would not have died.” Even in this question you see an assumption that Jesus loves them, a certainty that he had the power to overcome Lazarus’s sickness, but also confusion why he didn’t intervene. For us, in our time of loss, it was very comforting to look at Jesus’ response in this Scripture. He empathized with them, was genuinely moved by their loss, and reminded them of the truth that he is the resurrection and the life. I realized finally that the theological constructs to explain evil in the world didn’t make me feel any better. . . . I wanted God to show up and remind me he was present in my life and loved me.
Q: Why is it a problem to have an imaginary Jesus?

A: Regardless of where they are spiritually, most people desire to find truth. No one wants to believe a lie. To have an imaginary Jesus means that you’ve abandoned what is true in order to follow your own construct. And that’s a problem because this construct now prevents you from interacting with the real Jesus. It creates a barrier between you and the real Jesus. And even if you’re not a Christian and you have a false idea of Jesus, then that prevents you from having true knowledge about something. No one wants that. We all want the truth.

Q: How do you know that you’re interacting with the real Jesus and not an imaginary one?

A: We have Scripture, which is a great guide because it’s essentially Jesus’ autobiography. We can look at that and see what Jesus says about himself. If some Jesus I’m interacting with doesn’t match up with the Jesus in Scripture, that’s not the real Jesus. So the most objective way is to look at Scripture ourselves or in church and discover what is true about Jesus.

But it’s not just about ancient writings; we can also get to know Jesus personally. He is alive and real. So as I pray to him, as he says things to me, whether he is speaking through Scripture or in the midst of prayer or through the words of someone near me, I can get to know who he is that way, too. I should pay attention and make sure that
those things aren’t in conflict with Scripture, but personal interaction can help me get to know him. Like Scripture says, “The sheep know the voice of the shepherd.” And as I get to know his voice better and recognize it, I can be increasingly certain that I recognize his voice when he speaks.

It is interesting to study the words used to describe people’s responses to Jesus in Scripture: awe, amazement, terror, anger, et cetera. When’s the last time Jesus terrified me? And where in Scripture does it talk about people having “mild good feelings” when interacting with Jesus? The real Jesus can be enormously frustrating, frightening, or unexpectedly lavish with his love, and he says things I simply don’t want to hear. If your Jesus doesn’t fit that description, you really have to wonder whether he’s the real one or not.

Q: So if I read the book and I discover that I’ve been following an imaginary Jesus, it doesn’t mean that I’m not really a Christian?

A: Not necessarily. Everyone has misconceptions about Jesus, and it may be that you’re simply in the process of getting to know him better. I’ve been married for over ten years, and I’m still learning new things about my wife. That doesn’t mean I’m not married to her.

At the same time, just believing the right things doesn’t mean that you’re in relationship with Jesus. I’ve met people who go to church and “believe” in Jesus, but
they’re not actually following him. Jesus talks about both things in Scripture—believing in him and following him. If you’ve read the book and discovered you’re following an imaginary Jesus, you’re faced with the question of whether you are willing to ditch your imaginary Jesus and follow the real one. And following the real Jesus can be a really amazing, life-changing, sometimes frightening experience. You can talk with a pastor, a Christian friend, or a spiritual mentor you trust about all this, or feel free to send me a note on Facebook if you want to know more.

Q: How can Christians use this book to start conversations about faith?

A: If you can say it honestly, tell people, “This book showed me that I had some misconceptions about Jesus.” People aren’t used to hearing that from Christians. Then tell them you want them to read it so you can discuss it together. Also, tell them it’s funny. They won’t believe you. If you can get them to read the first chapter, though, I think you’re on your way to a good conversation.

I’ve had atheists read and enjoy the book, so I think it really can be for anyone. It’s not a preachy book, so if your friends can deal with the question, “Who is Jesus, really?” they’re going to enjoy themselves. People like to be asked their opinion, so be sure to let them talk about the book; don’t just share your own thoughts. Also, the author of the book (that’s me) likes to hear from readers and LOVES to hear from non-Christian readers. So feel
free to connect them to me if that would be helpful in your conversations. People the author does not like to hear from: empty-handed pizza delivery boys, his health plan (they never call just to say something nice), and automated phone calls about politics.

Q: Finish this sentence: “If you like __________, you’ll like Imaginary Jesus.”
A: “If you like breathing, you’ll like Imaginary Jesus.”

Q: What’s your biggest hope for Imaginary Jesus?
A: Many people haven’t been able to have a conversation about Jesus because it’s been too boring or the language is inaccessible or they haven’t wanted to have that conversation. I hope this book will change that. It’ll provide an environment where people can sit down with anyone—people they agree with, people they disagree with, people they’ve known a long time, people they’ve just met, Christians, non-Christians—and have a fun, exciting, interesting, enjoyable, relational discussion about who Jesus is.

And if the book does that one very simple thing and if Jesus has the grace and the love to show up in the midst of those conversations, then I would be absolutely thrilled by that.