

In the finale of the fourth season of the TV sitcom *Friends*, Ross (played by David Schwimmer) prepares to exchange wedding vows with his bride-to-be Emily. They stand with the minister in front of their friends, including Rachel (played by Jennifer Aniston) with whom Ross has shared an on-again off-again, agonizingly star-crossed romance ever since the first episode of the first season. The Minister begins:

Minister: Friends. Family. We are gathered to celebrate here today the joyous union of Ross and Emily. May the happiness we share with them today be with them always. Now Emily, repeat after me. I, Emily...

Emily: I Emily...

Minister: Take thee Ross...

Emily: Take thee Ross...

Minister: As my lawfully wedded husband in sickness and in health, till death parts us.

Emily: As my lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health, till death parts us.

Minister: Now Ross, repeat after me. I Ross...

Ross: I Ross ...

Minister: Take thee Emily...

Ross: Take thee Rachel...uh, Emily. Emily.

Ross's friends are, of course, shocked—no one more than Rachel. She looks around at everyone; everyone around looks at her. Looking cautiously at Emily, the Minister concludes:

Minister: Shall I go on?

And, as the script says, the picture fades to black. That's it. The end. The show and the season were over. After this cliffhanger, millions of Americans went wild with urgent speculation. What would happen to Ross and Emily? What would happen to Rachel? What would happen to their merry band of friends? For these questions to be answered, the viewing audience had to wait four and a half months for the next season's premiere. When it finally came, so many tuned in that the sitcom, which frankly had begun to show signs of wear, found rejuvenation and would continue for another six seasons.

A cliffhanger is a shocking plot twist at an episode or chapter's end in which a character is put in such physical or emotional peril that the audience feels compelled to watch or read the next. The term itself comes from the Thomas Hardy's 1872 novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in which at the end of one chapter the hero literally hangs from a cliff. A cliffhanger is a moment when the present is so shattered by calamity that it demands an answer from an uncertain future about what will happen next.

Today's Gospel reading from St. Mark ends with a cliffhanger. We just heard what happened to the Myrrh-Bearers: the three women who—three days after Christ's crucifixion—brought spices and scented oils to His tomb to anoint His body. When they arrive, they see a mysterious young man in a white robe who tells them to go tell the disciples that Jesus is risen from the dead. So, the women leave. But they do not just leave—they *flee*. The Greek word is *phuego*, which also means to vanish. As they flee, their bodies are overwhelmed with, as the Greek language puts it, *tromos kae ekstasis*—a trembling and almost ecstatic surge of awe and terror. Mark concludes that, as they flee, “they told no one, for they were afraid (16:8).” That's it. The end. Fade to black. Unlike the other three Gospels, on Easter morning there is no encounter with the Risen Christ; there is only the women with their uncontrollable fear. Why does Mark's Gospel end like that?

According to church tradition, Mark was not so much the author of the Gospel as he was its stenographer. The Apostle Peter told Mark about the life of Christ; Mark wrote down what Peter told him. Twenty-five years earlier, Peter left Jesus' followers in Jerusalem to care for Jesus' followers in Rome as their bishop. But at the moment of the storytelling, Peter is in a Roman prison, waiting for his own crucifixion which will come at any moment. Peter had been caught in the dragnet the Emperor Nero cast in 64 A.D. when Nero launched his horrific persecution of the Christ's church in Rome. On Death Row, with the clock ticking,

Peter wants Mark to give Jesus' Roman followers neither a simple history nor his own memoir: Peter's Gospel has a different purpose.

In Nero's persecution, those in Peter's flock who had not been arrested, tortured, or killed are in hiding: they are terrified, and Peter knows it. He knows that they are living in a cliffhanger; in the calamity they suffer, they desperately yearn to know what will happen next. Will Jesus return to rescue Peter? If Jesus does not, can they trust Jesus to take care of them? Peter's Gospel to Mark is not a sermon that introduces Jesus to those who have never heard of Him; it is an encouraging love letter to those who have heard of Jesus, have given themselves to Him, but are afraid He will not be with them when they need Him most.

This is why Peter ends his Gospel abruptly with a cliffhanger. He draws his flock's attention to the terrified women at the Tomb because those women and his people are in the same situation. The Myrrh-Bearers were terrified because they looked for Jesus, could not yet find Him, and did not know what would come next. Likewise, Peter's flock is terrified because in their suffering they are looking to see Jesus but, completely understandably, are so blinded by fear that they just can't. And therefore, completely understandably, they just can't trust in what is coming next. Peter is trying to reassure them that just because they do not see Christ does not mean that Christ has abandoned them. Just as the Risen Christ was at work when the Myrrh-Bearers were in the dark and afraid, so too He is at work with them, whether they see it or believe it or not. For the Myrrh-Bearers, for the 1st century Roman Christians, and for us, the Resurrection is bigger than everything we do not understand and anything we fear.

Here ends the academic lecture. It may or may not have been interesting. But we are not here today for an academic lecture. We are here today because, whether we know it or not, whether we understand it or not, whether we believe it or not, we need help. This morning, in this room, some of us—many of us, even most of us, in fact—are living from day

to day like one cliffhanger after another. Even though we have no control over anything, we are dying to find out what happens next. A surprising health diagnosis, for us or for someone we love—that is a cliffhanger; an unexpected reversal in our job or our financial security—that is a cliffhanger; a simmering or recently revealed addiction or other unhealthy coping mechanism that is a cliffhanger; a breakdown in our marriage or other vital relationship—that is a cliffhanger. Or, perhaps even worse, we may just be exhausted by trying so hard to single-handedly create ourselves as the person—the spouse, the parent, the adult child, the friend—we have always wanted to be or have been expected to become. You and I are all dying of something all the time. We come here today to find—at the very least—a temporary, anointing salve of heaven-scented peace. But like the Myrrh-Bearing women who came for a burial but found something unexpected, we find here today the possibility that even in our fear, fatigue, or grief, God is already at work to remake everything new in us. Christ is risen from the dead. Our failures, our sins, our guilt, our shame, our weariness, and our fears are dead. His Resurrection and His healing grace are far larger than anything that kills us.

On November 23, 2010, in Weld County, Colorado, Deputy Sam Brownlee—aged 43—was killed in the line of duty by a suspected gang member after a high-speed pursuit. He left behind two sons from a previous marriage—Tanner and Chase—and two stepchildren from Heather, whom he married just a year before. Tanner was fifteen when his father died. Five years later, Tanner and his brother learned that they had to chance to bid on their father’s squad car at a charity benefit for survivors of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty; understandably, they wanted that car more than anything. Before the auction, Tanner told a reporter, “It’d mean a lot to me and my brother. We’ve been through a lot.” Having tapped into their life’s savings and after a successful GoFundMe appeal, they raised \$12,500, which was how much the Kelley Blue Book valued the car. Tanner felt confident that his bid for his father’s legacy would be enough. On the day of the auction, as the bidding

rose from \$5,000 to \$7,500, Tanner made his offer with everything he had. But he was shocked when the bidding continued: among various bidders, it rose from \$12,500 to \$36,000, then \$42,000, and then \$57,000. Tanner trembled and wept while his father's squad car—his last connection with his father—slipped away. What would he do next, what could he do next, to find peace? As his mother held and comforted him, Tanner watched as the car was sold to a local farmer for \$60,000. But no one could have imagined that the farmer, after accepting the keys from the auctioneer, would walk to Tanner, say, "Tanner? Here is your car," and drop the car keys into his hand. The two had never met, but the farmer had heard Tanner's story and decided that he would spend whatever it took to help heal Tanner's grief; by grace, in so doing, he also helped many other unknown officers' grieving orphans.

That is how God works in Resurrection. In healing one of us, He heals all of us. And in healing all of us, He heals all in us. What always seemed to be the end for all of us is now just a new beginning for us all. Every day, you and I are live our story as if we were hanging on the edge of a cliff. But when we fall, Christ has come to catch us, to raise us up, and to bring us home to the Father. We no longer run away from tombs in trembling fear; instead, we run with hope to healing and to love that will never end. No matter what we fear, no matter what is killing us, God in Christ has come to us to start a new chapter, a new episode, a new life—one that starts outside of His empty Tomb and never ends.

Here is your absolution. Here is your Resurrection. Here is your freedom from everything you have ever feared. So, with Him, shall we go on?