

**OFF SCRIPT**  
**John 11:23-27**  
**John 18:37-38**

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When an actor refuses to follow the lines written by the screenwriter, the informal term is “ad-libbing.” The technical term is “improvisation.” The actor has his own opinion and, thus, refuses to stick to the script placed before him. Some directors welcome improvisation, while others oppose it. But the reality is some of the greatest lines in cinema history have been made up in the moment.

You remember that iconic movie, *A Few Good Men*? During a murder trial, snot-nose lawyer, Lt. Daniel Kaffee, played by Tom Cruise, puts pressure on cocky Col. Nathan Jessep, played by Jack Nicholson, by challenging the ranked, seldom questioned military officer – challenging his ego, his authority – pushing his proverbial buttons. On the witness stand, Jessep goes a rant, declaring “You can’t handle the truth.”

**Lawyer Kaffee:** Colonel Jessep, did you order the Code Red?

**Judge Randolph:** You don’t have to answer that question!

**Col. Jessep:** I’ll answer the question!

*[to Kaffee]*

**Col. Jessep:** You want answers?

**Lawyer Kaffee:** I think I’m entitled to.

**Col. Jessep:** You want answers?

**Lawyer Kaffee:** I WANT THE TRUTH!

**Col. Jessep:** YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH!

This earthquake proclamation cuts through the courtroom like a knife. But that line wasn’t the line written. He was supposed to have said, “You already have the truth.” That’s very different from “You can’t handle the truth.” The improvisation, the veering off script, was made up by Nicholson himself on the spot, rounding off a hair-raising 21 minute battle between himself and Cruise. This modification amplifies Jessep’s sense of superiority over the lower ranked, snotty-nosed Kaffee.

*Jaws*, the summer blockbuster that made Steven Spielberg a household name, is considered one of the most memorable movies of all time. The scene in question comes at the most pivotal part in *Jaws*. Roy Scheider’s character, Mark Brody, the police chief, sees the film’s antagonist, the great white shark, emerge from the depths of the deep for the first time. After the harrowing experience of seeing the size, the unusual dominance of the creature, Brody walks backward, turns to Quint (played by Robert Shaw), the captain of the fishing boat, and says, “You’re going to need a bigger boat.” That line – impromptu, off script, ad-libbed – captures the sheer size of the shark perfectly, and Scheider’s delivery makes it one of the most memorable moments in all of cinema history.

However, according to Carl Gottlieb, one of the film's screenwriters, this line was nowhere to be found in the actual script.

But there is another who went off script, who refused to follow the lines written for Him by others, penned by the powers threatened by His presence.

When you examine the Gospels, you discover they primarily deal with the last eight days of our Lord, beginning last Sunday with Palm Sunday and concluding with the climax of Easter Sunday. As the controversial rabbi was journeying toward Jerusalem, everyone was trying to write the final script for Jesus.

The disciples were seeking a Messiah to overthrow the rule of Rome and set up an earthly kingdom. They fight – James and John – over who may sit at the right and left hand of the Christ when He comes into His kingdom.

The religious leaders wrote an entirely different ending to Jesus' story. Having already sold their souls to the powers of the Empire and enjoying the fruit of their compromised consciences, they scripted an ending of death, doom, and darkness. They desperately needed the rabbi to stop healing the sick, raising the dead, and multiplying the manna.

You recall Jesus had three special friends in Bethany: Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Lazarus was sick, sick unto death. The sisters sent word to the Lord saying, "Come, the one you love is sick." But when Jesus heard the cry of his friends, He tarried. He allowed Lazarus to die. Jesus said to His disciples, "I'm glad I wasn't there to heal Him, because I want you to see and believe." The disciples are fearful for their lives going to Bethany, going that close to Jerusalem, for the authorities are conspiring to capture and kill the Christ.

By the time Jesus and His disciples finally made it to Bethany, Lazarus had laid in the tomb for four days. Already the air was thick with the stench of death. As Jesus arrived in Bethany, Martha runs out. And Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life, and the one who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.**" And then He asked, "Do you believe this?" And Martha makes the proclamation of the ages – the proclamation you need to make today: "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who comes into the world."

Jesus asked where Lazarus was buried. At the tomb, seeing the sadness that death brings, Jesus weeps. Next, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." And Lazarus, who was once dead, lives again.

With this, Jesus defies death itself. The religious authorities are rattled, fearful that they might lose their power, their place. The Chief Priests and the Pharisees call for the council to be convened, asking, "What are we doing in regard to the fact this man is performing many signs? If we let Him go on like this, all the people will believe in Him and the Romans will take both our place and our power." But Caiphias, who was the High Priest that year, said to them, "We must stop this miracle worker in His tracks. It is better for one man to die for the people than the whole nation should perish instead."

John tells us he really didn't say that all on his own. He was actually prophesying that Jesus was going to die for the nation. And not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who were scattered broad. So from that day on, they planned to kill Him.

So the religious authorities had no patience for a rogue rabbi who had gone off script, so they conspired to kill him. No more healing the sick. No more casting out demons. No more commotion concerning whether He might be the Christ. They planned to kill the Christ. Yes, the religious wanted His story to end in death, His death. That was their scripted end for Jesus.

Yet still, the ruling authorities wrote a third script entirely different from the lines written by the disciples and the religious authorities. Herod and Pilate – they simply wanted to end the play with no applause. Nothing noteworthy, please. If they could just keep the peace in the public square, that's all they dare ask for.

You remember the drama in scripture? How many times [3 in John's Gospel] did Pilate say, "I find no fault with Him"? How many ways did he offer to let the alleged criminal, the Christ, go free? First, Pilate tries to give him back to the Jews. But the Jews say, "No. We demand the death penalty. And we don't have the power to crucify this one who claims to be the Christ."

Next, he hands Him over to Herod, under whose jurisdiction Jesus belongs. Herod just so happened to be in Jerusalem, so Pilate sought, once again, to pass the buck. But Herod and his soldiers just roughed up the rabbi and sent Him back to Pilate. But the people continued to shout, "Crucify. Crucify. Crucify Him." At last, cornered by the bloodthirsty crowd, Pilate, symbolically washing his hands, handed Him over to be crucified.

But Jesus refused to blindly follow the script of the procurator Pontius Pilate. Jesus always and in every way refused to stay on script. He didn't choose the ending written by His disciples, nor the one written by the high priests, nor even the one written by Rome. Instead, He followed the unimaginable, unfathomable conclusion written by His Father, one of suffering and yet glory.

Sometimes, like all the other players in this cosmic drama, we, too, want to control the Christ, assigning Him lines to say. But He refuses us, just like He denied them. Instead, He becomes threatening and uncontrollable, maybe even unmanageable. As the ruling reigning Messiah, in the end, He looks to all and invites us into His drama where He follows the unpredictable lines written by the Father. "Come," He says, "and die with Me, and then rise with Me from the dead."

And that's Easter. Not anyone of us would have ever written the script this way. We couldn't have imagined a Christ who reigns from a cross, a king who wears a crown of thorns, a liberator who is bound by Rome. And, yet, God wrote the script exactly that way – unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unfathomable. That's what makes it divine. It's nothing we could have ever invented, contrived, or come up with – that power comes through weakness, that life comes through death, that freedom comes through being bound, that peace with God comes by placing our sins on the bruised back of the Christ.

You remember what Jesus said to Lazarus's sister, Martha? "I am the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." And then He asked, "Do you believe this?"

Christ has done all that Christ can do. Now, it's up to you. Do you, yourself, believe – believe in the empty tomb of the Lord, the Creator of the cosmos, the Christ crucified, and yet glorified, by the empty tomb?

At the end of the day, theological reflection can only take us so far. In our hearts, we need to know the story.

The revered American writer, Joseph Mitchell, was raised in the church in the South and knew its language. In the last decades of his life, he attended Grace Church in New York. He told a group of parishioners of a conversation he had with his dying sister in North Carolina. As he sat by her deathbed, she asked him, "Buddy (that's what she called her brother), what does Jesus' death on the cross a long time ago have to do with my sins now?" Mitchell, who was something of an instinctive theologian though certainly not a trained one, struggled to find the right words. He knew how important the words were; he knew how monumental the moment. But like a meticulous writer, he sorted through all the possible expressions available, and finally he said, with his characteristic occasional stammer, "s-s-somehow, he was our representative." That's all he said. Academic inquiry must hold its peace for a moment in the space between the question and the response.

In some ways, Joseph Mitchell and his sister were, in fact, better readers of the Bible than many highly trained scholars, because her question and his answer were wrenched out of their guts, on the deathbed at the moment when it mattered. They weren't casually pondering the cross in the confines of the classroom. It was necessary in that moment for Joseph Mitchell to say something meaningful to his sister. The story of salvation is not "beyond words." The New Testament is from beginning to end a living witness to the apostolic preaching. The apostles preach "He is alive! He is alive! He is alive!" The cross, the crucifixion, the empty tomb is the message of good news. (Fleming Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, p. 5-6)

Jesus tells Pilate in John 18, "The reason I came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on truth's side listens to me."

"What is truth?" Pilate rebukes Jesus.

Earlier in this gospel (chapter 14) Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through me."

Can you handle the truth?

Jesus said to his friends, "I am the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never really die." And then he asked – then he asked – "Do you believe this?"

Jesus asks you the only question that anyone will ever ask that really matters. Your eternity depends on your answer. So, do you? Do you believe?

Can you handle the truth?