

At the Foot of the Cross

Original concept by Elgin Louis

Written by Robert Jackson and Debbie Leung

This is a play that is easy to produce, but has the potential to be very powerful. We performed it at a “campus” regional service in the East some years ago. The play centres around a series of speeches given by three people associated with Jesus’ passion (his suffering and death) and the effect that it has on them. These monologues tell the story of Jesus’ death, and they are framed by the story of Peter, James and John – first at Gethsemane, and then when they hear about the empty tomb. No props are needed except a scroll. We dressed the three apostles in simple clothes and sandals; Pilate wore a toga (or was it a bed sheet?) as well as a bracelet, broche etc. The Centurion was dressed in army gear, and Mary in a black dress. A few sound effects are also called for.

I wanted to emphasise in the play the significance of Jesus’ resurrection, and the devastation of his death. A powerful theme in this play is the spiritual Kingdom of Christ, a concept which all of the characters grapple with time and again, and which we continue to grapple with today. I ploughed the Gospel accounts for dialogue, especially John, and I was blessed to have written the play with Debbie Leung, who wrote Scene 4. It was her decision to go to Isaiah 53 for inspiration, and that has added a powerful dimension of prophecy to the play, as well as marking Mary Magdalene as the most insightful and spiritually-minded character of the play.

Original Cast

- ✝ **Peter:** Dave McLeish
- ✝ **James:** Minh Nguyen-Hoan
- ✝ **John:** James Satriawan
- ✝ **Pilate:** Robert Jackson
- ✝ **Centurion:** Kenson Low
- ✝ **Mary Magdalene:** Michelle Scandrett
- ✝ **Joanna and Mary, Mother of Jesus:** Tina Asher and Leticia Carbajal

Scene 1: Gethsemane

Peter, James and John (“The Three”) are kneeling down together praying. Peter starts to breathe heavily and uncomfortably.

Peter: (Whacks the ground.) It’s no good. (Standing up) I can’t pray. I just can’t pray.

James: (Standing up) Yeah Pete, me too. It’s as if God isn’t there at all...

John is locking in kneeling position.

James: Wow, look at my brother, he’s pretty into it.

John snores.

Peter: The spirit is willing...

James: ...but the flesh is weak.

John: (Stirs) Oh, sorry guys. (Gets up)

Peter: I can’t understand what’s wrong with Jesus. He seemed so burdened, especially today; all he talks about is dying.

John: Yeah, he even said he *felt* like dying.

James: Man, what kind of burden would make you want to *die*?

Peter: (Introspectively) I think something’s gonna happen... tonight. (Looks offstage right) I mean, he always goes and prays, but never like this. Remember that first hour he came back? That hour, his sweat was pouring out like blood!

John: Maybe this is finally the time he wants us to rise against the Romans?

James: He told us to bring swords...

Peter: (Following) And he told me he wanted a new Kingdom established.

John: (Getting excited) Finally, we can call down fire on all of our enemies!

James: (Suddenly faithless) But what hope do we have? The Romans would crush us before we could even utter a curse against Herod.

John: (Agreeing) And Pilate is the most iron-fisted governor I’ve ever seen.

Peter: (Despondent) After all that Jesus told us, it’s like we still don’t have any answers...

James: (Forlorn) Or any hope.

Peter: It’s as if God has just forsaken us. (Pause) Do you hear that?

A sound effect is used, sounding like a garrison of soldiers approaching – drawing swords, clashing metal armour, shuffling feet...

The Three: (In unison) Romans!

James: (Frantic) The Romans are here!

John: (Desperate, screaming out to the right) Jesus, run!

Peter: (Panicking) We gotta get out of here!

They start to run off. The frantic atmosphere continues. The sounds become louder.

James: (Shouting) C’mon Jesus, run for your life!

John: (Startled) He’s not coming!

Peter: (Just as they all disappear off stage) Then save yourselves!

Exeunt.

Scene 2: Pilate

Pilate in his chamber, delivering a speech to the audience (who will represent Jesus).

Pilate: (A declaration) So, you are the one they call Christ... I'm honoured to finally meet you. I've heard... many things. (Sternly:) We all know why you're here. Grievous charges have been laid against you. (Getting worked up:) The Sanhedrin has found you guilty of blasphemy, and you stand here on trial for treason against the Imperial authorities. So tell me... are you the "King of the Jews"? (Pause) Aren't you going to answer? (In disbelief) See how many things they are accusing you of! Well? (Demanding) Are you going to defend yourself? Everyone has a right to a defence! You truly are something else. Speak! (Pause) In that case, listen. (Seethingly:) Your people, your religion and your laws are driving me mad, and are nothing but a burden to the grand Empire, which we have fought for centuries to build. (Looking down:) Do I care for your blasphemy? Do I care that you have over-turned your temple? Do I care that all the people welcomed you as you rode into Jerusalem? Am *I* a Jew? (A grand affirmation:) *No!* (Accusing:) Remember, it was *your* people and *your* chief priests who handed you over to me to be crucified! I care nothing for your petty laws and rituals. Your traditions and your beliefs are meaningless to me. And yet... (Sardonically) you claim to be a King; but look at you... You want to establish a Kingdom; but you have done *nothing*. You oppose your religious leaders, and yet you have no standing at all. Huh! It's no wonder the gods have forsaken you. (Irritated:) You are a frustration, a stain – and you ruin the order which I strive to maintain! And yet... (Sudden change of tone:) I can find no charge against you. You are insane; and a fool; but no criminal by my books. (Reasoning...) However, the fact remains that your people want you dead. (Pause) Listen!! Don't you hear them cry out against you?

Sounds of angry mob are heard: Jeering, shouting and cries of "Crucify him", "Release Barabbas" etc. are heard.

Pilate: (spits out) They would rather a murderer than you. Yet I know why they brought you here: Spite! It was jealousy that the people could love you and bow down with branches of peace as you entered the city... (Menacingly) But surely you recognise that your case is hopeless and that your stand is finished. (Profoundly:) As you are lifted up on the cross, you will be swallowed up by the jaws of justice, and your name will never rise again. (pause) What do you have to say for yourself...(Off hand) You know what, I find you guilty of being mute. (Sarcastically:) And you wanna be a King; you're insane. (A final outburst:) Fine, you want to be crucified? Then I wash my hands of it. May blood be upon your head, I am innocent in this matter. (Walking off) *Take him away!*

Exeunt.

Scene 3: At the foot of the Cross

The sole figure of the centurion is seen, ordering and watching the crucifixion, happening right in front of him (i.e. where the audience is).

Centurion: (Looking at the audience) OK nail 'im up! We haven't got all day!

Optional: Sounds of hammering nails and groans of pain are heard.

Centurion: (Aside) This is one of the sorriest sights I've ever seen. (Ordering again:) Alright, now raise him up! That's the way. Up... up.

Optional: Sounds of a cross being lifted up by ropes.

Centurion: Good work, that's the last one for today. (Paces, as if inspecting the many crucifixes that are around) After generations of practice, we have perfected the art of execution – (Stark:) crucifixion; the most painful, humiliating and deterring way that a man can die – and with a 100% success rate. (Seems quite proud of himself) And with the authority in my hands, I bring justice to all of the wretches and filth that well up in this god-forsaken land. (Frustrated:) By Zeus, what I would give to be back in Rome, where the criminals are strong and where the Empire pulses and thrives. Here, there is only filth and petty uprisings. (Looks dead centre – at Jesus) Take this one, the one who people called Christ – he claimed to rule a Kingdom of his own. But look at him now! My men cast lots for his clothes, and even now, a crowd has gathered to insult him.

Sounds of an angry mob: "Save yourself!" "Down with him!" "If you're god, then come down from the cross!" "Yeah!" etc.

Centurion: (Staring in the direction of Jesus) But yet, he holds himself up with such strength. (Amazed) All of the others are passed out or sobbing or screaming for mercy; yet this sole figure is indeed sorrowful, yet strong; he is beaten and tortured, and yet... his spirit is not broken. Was it he who forgave my men as they nailed him to the cross? And this very same man is now ministering to the criminal beside him, whose tears of sorrow are running down his face. (Looking far off, straight ahead, and in horror) And what is happening to the temple curtain?

Suddenly, the whole room goes dark and the sound of tearing fabric is heard.

Centurion: (In the darkness) Surely, this man was the son of God.

Exeunt.

Scene 4: Mary Magdalene

Location unimportant. Mary is lamenting the death of Jesus. She is holding an ancient looking scroll.

Mary: (Despondent) I never thought I'd live to see one of my dearest friends go through this – these sick, barbaric rituals that I would never even wish upon my worst enemy. I see it all happening over and over – the horror! (More sombre, reading:) “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.” Maybe that’s why he was so quiet; so patient. Any other man would have begged for mercy... or confessed to anything as long as it would stop the pain! (Wondering:) Where did his strength come from – the power to carry on even though he was treated like a criminal? (Remembering:) And the crowd... did they really think he was a criminal? I can’t forget those words. They must have hurt so much – to hear his own people betraying him and choosing to release a real criminal instead. That’s even worse than mockery from the Romans! (Confused:) Why didn’t he speak? After all those miracles – he *must* have been able to escape at any time, surely! Or at least to speak for himself. (Reminiscing:) He spoke so often of a Kingdom that he would establish right here on earth; right inside our hearts. What will come of that now? If only he had said something! If only he had accepted help from his friends... maybe we could have found a way... (Staunchly:) he didn’t deserve this... He deserved it less than anyone I know... but he still stayed so quiet... so patient and resolved... as if he knew there was some other purpose for his suffering. I never imagined that it would end like this: (Angrier:) abandoned, betrayed, insulted; and to what purpose? Is there a purpose? I guess that only he would know. (Looks down. Pause.) There are so many questions. But one keeps coming back – who will there be now he is gone? I can’t believe we will never be able to see him again! He was our best friend and our only hope... and they gave him away to the claws of death – they traded him for a criminal and beat him. (starting to break down:) I don’t want to remember, but I have to. All the spitting, the screaming and curses... I could feel their anger and hatred. They pierced him and whipped him... treated him worse than any animal. Oh God, why? Did you have to *leave* us? Why didn’t you say something... *do* something while you could? (On the verge of tears:) Maybe we’ll never know; and have to bear this loss forever. (Looking upward:) Why did you leave us alone? We’ll be so lost and lonely without you. Can’t you come back? Even now? One more miracle, dear God? (Helplessly:) Don’t leave us now... we need you so much – your wisdom, your guidance, your love. Please... come back! We need to see you; to hear you and feel your presence. Tell us... just once more; tell us what it’s all for. (Slowly:) I can’t believe it, that you’re gone. It *can’t* be true, it can’t be true. (Weeping:) You’ve got to come back and help; help me; help every one of us!

Exeunt

Optional Interlude:

Four piece choir, wearing black, sings “Take a Look on the Mountain”

Scene 5: The Empty Tomb

The Three sitting around in some house, feeling discouraged.

James: (Shrugs shoulders) So... what do we do now?

John: What *can* we do? We gave up our whole lives for him, and now he's gone.

Peter: (Staring at the ground) Never again can I hold my head up high. I'm so ashamed... I denied him, John. (Frustrated:) I denied my Lord three times! What am I to do? (Slumps his head in his hands. Pause.)

John: (A little more upbeat; looking around) Guys... I think we need to lift here. Jesus gave us the very words of life! (More excited) We ought to go out there and give that gift to others! Surely that is what his Kingdom is all about, right? Delivering people from death!

James: (Sternly) But he's gone John! Death has taken hold of *him*... (Stark:) I fear that our preaching would be useless, and so is our faith.

Peter: (Still in his own, dark world) He looked at me, you know. I saw his eyes, those eyes filled with sorrow and remorse. As he was being beaten in the Sanhedrin, I felt like I was the one delivering the blows. And I remembered his words: "You will deny me three times." I swore on my life that I would never! But then I heard the rooster crow, and I knew that I was less than the least of all men. (Slumps pitifully)

John: (Thinking practically) Well, we have to do *something*. There's no use in just sitting here around, pitying ourselves.

James: (Seriously) I think it's time we went back to our nets. Dad has never forgiven us for leaving him the way we did, you know John, I mean we just left him in the boat! It's time we return to how things were.

Peter: (Staring forward into space, but pickling up the conversation) And then there's the wife. I think I've been really neglecting her, traipsing around Israel all these years. (More positive:) Yeah, things could be good, ya know James, returning to our families – just having normal lives again.

John: (Musing) But if only he could come back. (Hopefully) That would change, well, *everything*! He could tell us what to do and what the future holds, as well as how to take hold of it. We could see the chariots of fire, just like Elisha did.

Peter: (Dismissively) There's always a dreamer – John, that was all in the past. He's gone; that's the reality we need to face up to.

James: (Deathly) And what a stark reality it is! Remember when it turned dark the day he died? It's always that way, you know, even in the desert sun.

Mary Magdalene (Mary 1), Joanna and Mary, mother of Jesus (Mary 2), rush in.

Mary 1: (Triumphantly) The tomb is empty!

The Three are startled and look at each-other and at the women.

Joanna: (Exasperated) It's empty!

Mary 2: (Exulting) He's risen!

Peter bolts off. James and John stare at each-other in disbelief, and then sprint off as well. All exeunt.