

Were You There When they Crucified My Lord

A dramatic reading for the passion week

(The individual speakers will have to be identified in some way. Signs could be used. Or a voice could call forward each witness with the words: "John (Centurion, Pilate, etc.), where were you when they crucified our Lord (crucified Jesus, nailed the savior to the cross?) It is effective to have the witnesses speak from the congregation, to suggest that the questions apply somehow to all. The dialogue between the 20th century pilgrims can be tailored to fit the situation/congregation. The song "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" serves as a unifying element, and there are various ways it could be used. The entire presentation could be introduced by a brief explanation or by a reading of Isaiah 53: 1-6.

Hymn: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" - Stanza 1 (Solo, or group)

John:

Yes, I was there. Jesus and I were close friends and I was there the whole time. At the Passover meal we sat next to each other and I received from him the bread and wine. "This is my body," he said. And "this is my blood." Beautiful words and I realize what they meant. I listened with disbelief and dismay when Jesus said one of us would be tray him. And when he said, "Tonight you will all desert me," I just couldn't believe him. We were his close followers. We loved him. We wouldn't desert him!

When we came to the Garden of Gethsemane afterwards, Jesus chose me, along with Peter and my brother James to go with him, further into the garden, where he prayed to God.

I'm ashamed to say that I fell asleep, like the other two. Not just once. Three times. Jesus' words, "Couldn't you stay awake with me one hour?" have haunted me. It's as if they are burned into my heart.

Peter:

I was there, though there are some parts I'd like to forget. Like my rash words: "Maybe the others will desert you, Lord, but not me." I said that very confidently. And when Jesus turned to me and said, "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times," I was shocked. And hurt. Why would he say a thing like that?

In the garden of Gethsemane I was all zeal and bravado. I felt like I could protect Jesus from the clubs and swords of the crowd that showed up among the olive trees. I bravely shipped out my sword and cut off the ear of the priest's servant. It was a stupid, impulsive thing to do.

But it's my denial of Jesus that torments me. There at that courtyard fire I couldn't even admit to the maid, "Yes, I know Jesus. He's my friend. I'm his follower." Instead, I said, "No, I don't know the man."

Why couldn't I identify with him? Why couldn't I stand up for Jesus when he was facing the jeering crowds? The interrogation? Now I know how people feel when they wish they could go back and live some part of their lives over again. I wish I could have another chance. Do it better. Now, whenever I hear a rooster crow I think to myself: I couldn't have been more faithless. More cowardly.

Judas:

I was hoping you wouldn't ask. I was hoping that my betrayal would be something you wouldn't want to hear about. No, I didn't see Jesus crucified. But I was there, eating the Passover meal with Christ, after I had already agreed to betray him.

I left the dinner early to join those with whom I was collaborating. Together we came to the Garden of Gethsemane, me and the servant of the high priests and the elders, the police, a noisy mob with clubs and swords. The thirty silver coins the priests and elders had given me to do this were in my pocket and now it was time for me to deliver. And I did. I delivered Jesus into their hands. We'd agreed that I'd identify him with a kiss. I'm not proud of that.

Afterwards, those coins burned a tunnel in my soul. I knew it was blood money. I knew I had done a dastardly thing. But what's done can not be undone.

Song: (One line of "Were you there when they nailed him to the cross...")

Caiphas:

Of course I was there. It was my duty to do something about the man who was defying all our traditions and the authority of the temple. I was the one who told everyone, "It's better that one man should die for the people," though I realize that sometimes language is double-edged and you might understand those words differently than I do.

You see, I firmly believe that sometimes the end justifies the means, and sometimes you have to manipulate a mob to get a necessary thing done, even if it's not so pleasant. When we interrogated Jesus he was not cooperative. And in my opinion, he was inexcusably blasphemous too. That sort of thing can't be tolerated.

I did my best to get credible witnesses whose stories would indict him. That didn't work too well. So I appealed to the people's adherence to religious tradition. I worked their emotions till they yelled out, as I hoped they would, "Crucify him."

Herod:

Yes, I was there. Not at the crucifixion, exactly. But as far as I know, when I saw Jesus he was already a doomed man. I always wanted to see him, this Jew whose birth scared one Herod so badly he had scores of baby boys killed to get rid of a possible rival. Well, he failed. He didn't know that the real king was safe in Egypt.

Jesus had attracted a following, and that interested me. I'd heard about the signs and wonders he performed, and the prospect of seeing him perform a miracle intrigued me. But he wouldn't perform. Wouldn't answer my questions. A man in my position wants compliance. On the spot. This man did not comply.

Wee. As I said, he was doomed in any case. Was I being cynical, putting that royal velved robe around his shoulder? I suppose so. And I didn't stop the soldiers from taunting and abusing him. Soldiers are a rough lot. They take their pleasure where they can. The crucifixion took place as scheduled, I hear. I didn't give it much further thought.

Pilate:

I wish I hadn't been there. Really, you know, I wanted nothing to do with any of it. I realized right away this Jesus was not a criminal. He wasn't evil and he certainly didn't deserve to die. Personally, I would have liked to let him go. My wife begged me not to get involved.

I didn't care, particularly, what happened to him, but I really didn't want to be involved in such dirty politics. I wish the high priest and his gang could have handled it themselves, any way they wanted to. But they wanted nothing short of blood. I quickly understood that. And they needed my authority to do it officially.

I was that threat, I guess, that persuaded me: "If you don't do it, you won't be the emperor's friend any longer," they said. A psyched-up crowd can exert unbelievable pressure. So you could say it was political expediency that made me hand Jesus over to be crucified. Who wants to lose a secure job?

And yes, it's true that I said, "What is truth?" Said it cynically, I suppose. But I want to remind you that I tried to prevent his death. When they asked me to set a prisoner free, like every year, in honor of the holy day, I was hoping they'd come to their senses and choose Jesus of Nazareth. I didn't think much of that volatile, frenzied crowd when they chose Barabbas. So, in the end, it was the rabble that decided it, you might say. And that bit about me washing my hands. If I told you I woke up night after night, after the crucifixion, dreaming I was washing my hands to remove the blood, you'd understand the guilt and misery I have lived with. If I've learned anything from that whole unfortunate business, it's this: It's no use trying to weasel out of taking responsibility for your decisions. It doesn't work.

Roman soldier:

I was closer than anyone. You can't crucify a condemned man without touching his body. You hear his breathing, smell the sweat, and try not to see the fear in his eyes. Except in this case it wasn't so much fear as compassion that I sensed as I did the ugly thing. Drove the nails through his hands and feet.

Someone has to do the dirty work and you can't blame our unit for throwing dice for the dying man's clothes. Our pay isn't so good that it doesn't need to be topped up a bit. And what would you expect us to do while waiting for a man to die? Sometimes death is long in coming.

I was following orders. It wasn't *my* idea. Not *my* choice. You understand that, don't you I was following orders.

Simon of Cyrene:

It was by chance that I was there. I saw this procession winding out of the city and I knew it was probably another crucifixion. I saw a man struggling with his cross. I always thought it was going too far to make a condemned man carry his own cross. "He's not going to make it," I thought to myself, and then, before I knew what was happening, someone was yelling at me and someone grabbed me and someone else laid that wooden cross on my shoulders and suddenly I found myself carrying Jesus' cross for him.

So I've had the experience of carrying a cross not meant for me. But thinking about it later, I believe that cross was meant for me and I've become convinced – this may sound odd to you – that I was given an opportunity. A chance to do something gracious and good. I've never regretted it. It changed my life.

Mary:

I was there. I was always there, it seems. I was there at his birth, *giving* him birth. I was there in Jerusalem when he scared Joseph and me almost to death by disappearing. Afterwards I thought about his words: "I must be in my father's house." He was a rather thoughtful twelve-year-old. Later he used to say, "I must be about my father's business." And he wasn't talking about carpentry.

Yes, I was there when my son died, and I don't have words to describe the pain. Maybe if you're a mother you can imagine it. I thought of that old man, Simon, who was in the temple when Joseph and I first brought Jesus there with our offering. "A sword will pierce your heart," the old man said. I didn't know what he meant. I was happy and so proud of my son.

One of the last things Jesus did was to tell his friend John to look after me. "There is your mother," he told John. And then he said to me, "There is your son." He was always compassionate like that, always thinking about the other person. And so he died. I wasn't left without a family, but my heart was torn with a terrible sorrow.

Barabas:

I was there, and for me it meant, literally, my life. When Pilate asked the crowd which of us two they wanted freed, me or Jesus. I naturally expected them to say Jesus, he was better known than me, everyone had heard about Jesus. Me, on the other hand, I'm a nobody. Just a petty criminal. When they yelled my name, "Barabas! Give us Barabas!" I was stunned. That day I walked away, a free man. And Jesus was crucified. For me.

The Convict on the Cross:

They crucified me on the same day, right next to him. There was a third guy, too. Him and me, we were the scum, you might say. We were criminals and we deserved to die. The other guy taunted Jesus, dared him to get us all down from the cross. "If you are the Messiah, why don't you save all three of us from death," he said.

But I could tell Jesus was not like us. Maybe he was the son of God, like he claimed. So I said, "Think of me when you come into your kingdom."

And he turned and blessed me just by looking my way. He said, "Truly I say, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Centurion:

I was there at the crucifixion. I was in charge of the dirty work. But let me tell you something. When I heard his last words and when I saw the way he died, there was no doubt in my mind: This man was the Son of God. That's who we executed that day, the Son of God.

Song: "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb."

Joseph of Arimathea:

No, I wasn't there. Not at the crucifixion. But when it was discussed in council, those endless discussions about how to get rid of this troublesome person, I was against their suggestions. This was not a criminal we were dealing with. I knew he threatened our leaders with his authoritative teaching and his popularity with crowds, but to execute him – that was wrong. Well, they didn't listen to me. Maybe I didn't speak boldly enough.

That night, after Jesus died on that terrible cross, I was the one who took down his body. I guessed that there probably wasn't a tomb ready for him, so I had decided to lay him in my tomb. I bought a length of linen and wrapped him in it. It was dark by then, and so Nicodemus agreed to come with me. Both of us were believers, I might as well tell you. Our faith in Jesus was new and not very bold.

This burial was something we did for him. But it's so little when I think of what he did for us. For me. "Surely he was wounded for my transgressions, and by his wounds and bruises, I am healed."

A Jerusalem Resident:

Yes, I was there, too. Sometimes we'd follow the procession when there was to be an execution. You may consider that morbid. Cruel. But life was rough and we saw all of it. That day the crowd was large and restless, the procession long, and I'd heard that one of the condemned was that Jesus of Nazareth, the one they called the healer. The Teacher. I wasn't surprised they were crucifying him. Our elders and priests didn't support him. I think they were jealous of him just because he attracted the crowds. He was especially popular with the sick and the poor. That sort were always hanging around him when he came to Jerusalem.

As I watched him carry that heavy cross, I thought of all the burdens I've borne – and let me tell you, I've borne plenty. Children who are wayward. My husband unable to find ways of earning enough to keep us fed. And always that feeling of not being good enough. Of having failed. All those sacrifices I've carried to the temple. Were they ever enough?

Above Jesus' cross I read the words, "King of the Jews." I don't know who put them there, but I thought it was a cruel irony. You don't crucify a king! You honor him! I stayed there a long while watching. Six or seven times I decided I couldn't bear it anymore, and I turned to go. But just as I began to leave, Jesus spoke. I couldn't always make out his words but I remember when he said, "father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

I felt included in that prayer. I felt forgiven. The burdens I'd been carrying around seemed not quite so important. Maybe I could get free of them after all. As I stood watch at his cross, my eyes filled with tears and my heart overflowed with love and with gratitude. It was like nothing else I'd ever experienced.

Pilgrims of the 20th century: (*Voices 1&2*) Where are you?

Voice 1: Where am I? I confess I am not always at the cross. It's easy to be distracted and let my attention move here and there.

Voice 2: I confess, I'm not always grateful for the death of Jesus. A person gets busy with all sorts of things.

Voice 1: Good things, mind you, like family and church committees and responsibilities to aging parents. Community projects.

Voice 1: Doing homework, shopping. Part time work. Life gets hectic.

Voice 1: And burdensome.

Voice 2: I confess I try to carry my own burdens.

Voice 1: And work out my own salvation.

Voice 2: I like to be in control.

Voice 1: I wonder, do I betray Jesus with my self-sufficiency?

Voice 2: Do I deny him with my self-centered living?

Voices 1&2: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.

Voice 2: We have been ungrateful.

Voice 1: Our hearts have not been humble.

Voice 2: Our spirits are not contrite.

Voice 1: Teach us how to find your presence, God, at the cross.

Voice 2: Teach us how to share the death of Jesus.

Voices 1&2: But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.

Congregation may join in the singing of "Were you there..."

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