

# "I SAW HIM DIE!"

## An Easter Drama on the Resurrection of Christ.

by Mark Wellings. Written: Easter 1987. Revised: Easter 2002.

**WARNING: The dialogue in this short play is disturbing and may not be suitable for young children. Parents should be warned of this prior to presentation.**

CAST: Roman Centurion, Roman Soldier.

PREMISE: That the centurion present at the cross and death of Jesus Christ is the same centurion on duty the morning that Jesus' body goes missing from his tomb.

Suggested Bible Readings (prior to the play):

- a) Matt. 27:45-54 (optional)
- b) Mark 15:42-47
- c) Matt. 27:62-66

Suggested Bible Readings (immediately after the play):

- d) Matt. 28:1-10
- e) Matt. 28:11-15

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SCENE: A torch-lit room in the lower levels of the Governor's Palace in Jerusalem. A soldier, dressed in armour, sheathed sword and holding a hand spear, is standing near the door at one end of the room. There is a crude but sturdy table in the centre of the room and a single, well-worn stool behind it. There are small clusters of spears and swords leaning against the wall. The sun is just rising; pale light enters through a small window.

[CENTURION ENTERS FROM REAR AND STORMS DOWN AN AISLE TO THE STAGE]

CENT. Where are they! Where are they! They'll die for their carelessness; or worse if I have to wear the blame! Soldier, where are the guards from the Carpenter's tomb?!

SOLD. [SHAKING HIS HEAD WITH UNCERTAINTY] Don't know sir. They haven't returned.

CENT. Well find the cowering dogs and bring them to me! And do it before Governor Pilate finds out the grave is empty. I want the body returned!!

SOLD. Yes, sir! [SALUTES AND EXITS]

CENT. If this causes more trouble with these Jews, Pilate will have my head. And no one will be weeping over one less Centurion.

Pilate already has a bad record with Rome. He's started his own riot with these Jews on more than one occasion; and the last thing he wants is news of another incident reaching Rome.

I reckon the Jewish Leaders know it, too. They've used Pilate. They forced him to execute this, this ... "King of the Jews". And that's where this whole nightmare began.

[SOLDIER ENTERS DURING THIS LINE]

Yes, soldier? Report!

SOLD. Some are saying the guards were seen heading towards the Hebrew Temple, sir.

CENT. The Temple?! What?! Do they think they can seek sanctuary in a Hebrew Temple? Send two squads to bring them to me. I want no delays! I want them now! Bring them here to me, NOW!!

SOLD. Yes, sir! [SALUTES AND EXITS]

CENT. The Temple. Why the Temple? Do they think they can hide behind the robes of a Jewish Priest? It was they who petitioned Pilot so urgently and passionately to have this Jesus of Nazareth destroyed.

Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus of Nazareth!! By Jupiter, even when he's dead, this Galilean will not rest! Never have I met such a man ... and I've met many men, and killed plenty more.

Still this Jesus troubles me. Most of these rebel leaders are less than men, much less their reputation. Huh, some rebel anyway. He spent his days preaching about peace and love! Well, Roman Peace is the only peace I'll trust [TOUCHING HIS SWORD] and there's nothing any Jew could teach me about love – especially not one from Galilee.

I'll not forget the first time I saw him. We were all called out on full alert. The whole city had gone out to meet this Jesus as he arrived at the East Gate. [CHUCKLES] We found him riding in on the back of a small donkey – with a scruffy bunch of no-hopers following. [MOCKINGLY] Huh! And the people wanted to make him their king! We returned to the palace, laughing at these stupid Judeans.

That was just a week ago. I still can't believe that the religious leaders actually felt threatened by this man. Though he did cause an upset in their Temple; and from what I understand he made some political speeches against the priests; and even against Rome. (Along with every other Jew in this wasteland.)

He also broke some of their ridiculous laws, but if you ask me, these people make too much of their religion. I would rather be born a barbarian than a Jew. The *rules* they have! Well, this Jesus of Nazareth was always going to die for the rules he had broken. [SOLDIER ENTERS DURING THIS SENTENCE, AND WAITS TO BE NOTICED.] [MUSING, THE CENTURION NOTICES THE SOLDIER'S RETURN.] Yes, soldier.

SOLD. [A LITTLE HESITANTLY] Sir, we have received a rumour that the Galilean has been seen alive.

CENT. Alive! [LAUGHS INCREDULOUSLY] Alive! You can't be serious soldier. Whoever is weaving this tale obviously did not see him die! What news of the soldiers guarding the tomb?

SOLD. Nothing yet, sir. They've not yet returned.

CENT. Very well. Return to your post and let me know as soon as they are here.

[SOLDIER SALUTES AND EXITS]

Alive! ... This 'Jesus' died a dozen times that day. When we picked him up from Pilate's courtyard, he already wore the marks of a beaten man. Bound and bruised, the spit still clinging to his hair and clothes. But I knew worse was to come – they wanted him crucified.

Argh, I knew he was only a political prisoner, but I have no more love for these wretched people than Pilate. So when the governor said, "Scourge him!", I was glad to be on duty and to have my sport. I called in all the guards not on duty. Soon we had the whole palace guard having a go at him. And we know how to have our fun with a prisoner. The more they suffer, the more we enjoy it.

There were no shortage of volunteers to flog this Galilean, and many gave him their worst. Surprisingly, this 'teacher' did not cry out. So I got out the barbed whip – the one with bits of bone and metal splinters woven into the very strands. Few stay silent when they feel it tear their flesh.

I went around to watch his face as they began the lashes. I wanted to hear him beg for mercy, but he just looked back at me; flinching at the pain. His eyes were filled, not with hatred, but sorrow! – deep, deep sorrow. And as I looked into his eyes, I could see that I was the one he pitied! I ordered his flogging, but he pitied ME! ... he pitied me.

In anger, I grabbed the whip from the soldier in mid-stroke and laid in my heaviest blows. No man was going to pity me! Others saw and started to punch him, trying to rid him of his haunting expression. More than one prisoner had died there in that chamber, and it was only the thought of the cross that stopped me from ending his life right there and then.

He soon passed out. But we were not yet satisfied. So we brought him to, put an old purple robe over his shoulders and pressed a crown woven of thorns into his head. Then we stood back and mocked this would-be-king.

I could tell he was in great pain, but his sorrow only turned into acceptance. With such treatment, he would not last long on a cross, but I was determined to watch this man die, and to make his passage one of agony.

When Pilate washed his hands of the matter and sent him to Skull Hill, I knew this Jesus was mine to crucify as I willed. I ordered nails be brought. Nails are reserved for special prisoners, not for 'blasphemers'. But as far as I was concerned, he was special.

We made him carry his own cross; as we do with all who are to be crucified. But we had beaten him so badly that this carpenter – used to carrying and working with timber all day long – could not carry this one beam of wood.

As we moved out of the palace courtyard and into the streets, I was struck by the anger of the swelling crowd. The people had become incredibly venomous. Only days earlier they had been crying out their allegiance to him, but now they screamed abuse and hatred at him, the likes of which I have not seen, even against us Romans. Most laughed and jeered, many cried out for his death, while some just followed in the confusion.

I remember looking at him again. Who was this man that they should hate him so? What had he done that should incite such anger from so many? Was this claim to be a king, or even a god, so grievous that they should seek to kill this simple carpenter from Galilee with such hostility? The weight of their hatred and abuse was more than any soul could bear. It was as if all the scorn of Hades had come to see him die. ... I began to pity him, for never have I seen such a hateful crowd follow a crucifixion.

When we got to Skull Hill, there was no turning back. I ordered him to be nailed to the cross, but I let them give him strong wine to numb the shock - though I sometimes wonder if it helps. With each blow, he flinched violently and cried out; as all men before him have done. Each hammer strike jarred his whole body, but still he did not curse us.

Once done, we hung him between two petty thieves, who foolishly stole from Rome. His lingering death was quick compared to most – only half a day. But those few hours I will no forget for all my days.

Throughout the morning, the religious leaders, Chief Priests and even some of Herod's men, joined together in gloating over their 'victory'. They wanted him dead and gone. But more than this, they wanted him to die with their mocking abuse ringing in his ears.

What remained of his family stood close by, weeping bitter tears and sobbing. As I stood watching and listening, I learned more of this carpenter's teaching and works. Then one of the priests mockingly said, "He saved others but he cannot save himself!"

I began to realise this Jesus was the one some had been calling the Christ. Indeed, he was the man who had miraculously healed the dying servant of a fellow centurion posted in Galilee. I did not believe it then, but the stories persisted. Of this and more. It was said that he had even raised some from among the dead.

As I looked on him yet again, the injustice of his trial came home to me. I began to feel ashamed for what I had done to him. This man did not deserve to die. He sought only to give life to others, yet others now sought to take his life.

He spoke so few words from the cross – never once retorting at his mockers. At one time, while hanging there in all his pain, he opened his eyes and looked toward us, and he forgave us. ... He forgave us, his executioners! After all we had done to him - a man who did not deserve to die – he forgave us. And as he looked at me, I knew, he forgave me. ... He forgave me.

[PAUSE]

As he died, the very skies turned black; as black as a moonless night. It was as if the gods themselves had turned away. And the very earth shook, as if to wake the dead! This man was different to all who had died before him. Most are afraid to die; some accept it with bitterness; but he died as one who knew it had to be, and gave it up.

[PAUSE]

Mocked by the city; beaten until it hurt just to breath; nailed and hung on a rough wooden cross; deserted by his friends – this man died in utter solitude and agony.

... Jesus alive? No way. I saw him die.

[AFTER A MOMENT OF THOUGHTFUL SILENCE, THE SOLDIER ENTERS WITH A NOTE AND A SMALL BAG OF COINS]

SOLD. [SALUTING] They are just arriving at the gate now, sir.

CENT. All of them? None have fled?

SOLD. No sir. They are all approaching ... with a representative of the High Priest.

[THE CENTURION TURNS TO FACE THE SOLDIER, SURPRISED BY THE NEWS.  
THE SOLDIER MOVES TOWARDS THE CENTURION, AND HANDS HIM A NOTE]

A runner arrived before them with this note, for you sir.

CENT. [READS THE NOTE; ANGER GROWS IN HIS EYES] What is this insanity, this insult?! ... "Tell the Governor and the people that his disciples stole the body by night while those on duty slept."

Does this Jew not realise that death is the punishment for such a neglect of duties? In any case, even if they all slept, am I to say that a band of thieves crept onto their watch, moved the stone that sealed the tomb, and made off with the body without waking even one of the guards?! Were there no wounded or dead?! I think this Jew asks too much of a Roman officer!

SOLD. Sir, this bag of coins accompanied the letter. I have no doubt to make the story more acceptable to you. [CENTURION EXAMINES CONTENT OF BAG]

Sir, maybe it was this Jewish Council that removed the body.

CENT. No, this Galilean claimed he would rise from the dead after three days. That is why they petitioned the Governor so keenly to place guards on the tomb. They desperately wanted his body to remain in the grave.

Anyway, would they not simply present the body at the first whisper of his resurrection? No, one thing is sure, they did not take the body. And by this letter, we know that his disappearance has these priests scared.

SOLD. Sir, maybe we were too hasty in removing him from the cross. Maybe he was not completely dead.

CENT. What are you suggesting – that he revived in the tomb and then escaped?! Impossible, soldier! Have you forgotten that this man was twice beaten; that he was *nailed* by his hands and feet to a cross; that he'd had no food or water since his arrest, Thursday evening! Would you suppose that he unwrapped himself of his grave clothes, moved the huge stone by himself, and then fled from trained soldiers making good his escape on foot! That's even more unbelievable than the story about the sleeping guards!

Anyway, you were there. You saw him die. You saw the spear-wound in his side. You saw the body as we took it from the cross. This man was dead!

SOLD. Then ... this Jesus of Nazareth was more than a man. They say, he claimed he would die and rise again. They also say he raised others from their graves. Maybe the rumours are true. Maybe he was a god, in human form.

CENT. [CENTURION SHAKES HIS HEAD SILENTLY, NOT WANTING TO BELIEVE] No, no, NO! Why would God let mortal men do such wretched things to him, or his offspring? What we did to him, we would not do to a hapless dog! [PAUSE, THEN QUIETLY] Yet ... he forgave us ... as no man has.

SOLD. Sir, ... at the foot of the cross, I heard you say ... well ... you said that he was the Son of God. I remember you saying it. And it's true. Only God can cheat death and return to life. Maybe he is alive. Maybe this Jesus did rise from the grave.

CENT. [RESIGNED] If I had not been there, I would say you had listened to too many rumours and lost your mind. But as wild as your talk may seem, I cannot deny your words, ... nor mine. I have been a soldier faithful to Rome for many years. I have seen and heard many strange and awesome tales, but nothing like this.

The religion of this backwater nation bewilders me, and leaves me cold towards them. But if this Galilean, this 'Teacher', this Carpenter, this Jesus was the Son of their God, then I would like to know more of their God and His Son.

As he died, I knew he was no ordinary man; but I never imagined it would come to this. As he looked at me, and spoke his final words, I knew; I felt it then and was convinced: "Truly, this man was the Son of God." And now, more so if he has indeed risen from the grave. [PAUSE]

SOLD. Sir, what of the soldiers that now await you in the courtyard.

CENT. Of that, I do not know. But of this I am sure, fear-filled lies will rule this day. Truth must wait for others to discern. For in time, many more will ask about that empty tomb. And whether this day brings hope or dread to those who follow in the wake of this news, will depend on their own encounter with this Jesus the Christ.

As for me, I will ponder further the events of this last week, and be satisfied with my words first uttered at the foot of his cross. For I am now convinced: Truly, He is the Son of God.

Come let us talk with these soldiers and then the Governor.

[BOTH EXIT; SOLDIER FOLLOWING CENTURION] END