

Waiting: Keeping Vigil with the Women Who Followed Jesus

An Easter Program by Wendy Miller
From Walking in Love: One Body, One Spirit
Mennonite Women

Advance Preparation

Place a tall candle on a table you will use as a worship center. Place a cross on the table or on the floor beside it, and a large shallow bowl (or bowls) of sand near the cross. Have ready enough small candles for all participants to light one during the program. Place some scented candles—and matches—throughout the room, along with some containers of fragrant hand lotion (if you have members with severe allergies, you should omit this part of the program; have hypoallergenic lotion available in any case).

You will need three readers, two worship leaders, and a song leader. You may wish to ask soloists, duets, or trios to perform some of the hymns.

Program

Leader 1: Today we gather to listen to the darkest and the brightest story ever told: the Easter story.

Within this narrative is the story of women: those who accompanied Jesus. They too were his disciples. They stayed with him until what they thought was the end of his story. But to their surprise, the women were present at a new beginning, the resurrection. So often, our endings turn out to be God's beginnings.

Leader 2: The women at the tomb knew how to keep vigil. This was no empty marking of time. Rather, this was a prayerful presence, a time with Jesus, who invited his disciples early in his ministry to come and to be with him, and then to be sent out.

Leader 1: Later Jesus asked his disciples to stay with him as he agonized in the garden of Gethsemene over what saying "yes" to God would mean for him in the next 24 hours. The women who accompanied Jesus also discovered what saying "yes" means as they stayed with him.

Leader 2: As women who know and serve Jesus, we too are invited to come be with him, to wait in prayerful vigil along with the women of the gospel account. As we enter into the story, we too can become aware on a deeper level of what saying "yes" to God means for us.

Leader 1: Our readings today are a blend of the four gospel narratives as told in Eugene Peterson's *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English*. We will have several periods of silent meditation. If you are not used to silence, the pauses in our service may feel a bit uncomfortable to you at first. We invite you to relax in these times of quiet, entering into a prayerful time of being with Jesus.

Leader 2: As the story is told, open your mind's eye and enter into the scene, imagining yourself with the people who experienced those days. Where do you find yourself in each scene? Notice what you hear, what you see, and how you are responding within yourself to waiting, to keeping the vigil along with the women who accompanied Jesus. (*Light the tall candle.*)

Leader 1: The light of this candle can help us remember that as we gather the risen Jesus is with us. As we begin, let us open our attention to God together in prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for meeting with us
through the presence of your son, our Lord Jesus.
Kind and nurturing Spirit, help us as we listen to your word.
Open the ears of our hearts to hear, and the eyes of our hearts to see.
Still our minds and our hearts to listen.
Guide us into being present, into waiting, into vigil.
We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Narrator: It's Friday now, early in the morning. The trial has been going on all night (*slight pause*), ever since Jesus was arrested in the garden yesterday evening. (*Short pause*.) When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere and that a riot was imminent, he took a basin of water and washed his hands in full sight of the crowd, saying, "I'm washing my hands of responsibility for this man's death. From now on, it's in your hands. You're judge and jury." (*Short pause*.) Then he set Barabbas free but turned Jesus over for whipping and crucifixion. (*Pause*.)

The soldiers took Jesus and called together the entire brigade. They dressed him up in purple and put a crown plaited from a thorn bush on his head. Then they began their mockery: "Bravo, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a club, spit on him, and knelt down in mock worship. After they had had their fun, they took off the purple cape and put his own clothes back on him. Now they are about to march him out to nail him to the cross. (*Short pause*.)

First woman from Galilee: We arrived here at the place called Skull Hill at 9:00. The Roman soldiers crucified him along with two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. (*Short pause*.) I remember hearing Jesus praying, "Abba, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Sing HWB 257 "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" verses 1-2. After, allow a short time of silence.

Second woman from Galilee: One of the criminals hanging alongside is cursing him: "Some Messiah you are! Save yourself! Save us!" But the other one rebukes him: "Have you no fear of God? We deserve this, but not him—he did nothing to deserve this." Then he looks toward Jesus and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

First woman: Jesus replies, "Don't worry, I will. Today you will be with me in paradise."

Sing (several times) HWB 247 "Jesus, remember me." Allow a short time of silence.

Second woman: It's noon now. The sky is getting extremely dark. We women are standing at a slight distance from where Jesus is hanging, keeping vigil.

Sing HWB 260 (or 259) "When I survey the wondrous cross." Extinguish lights in the room, leaving the candle burning. Wait in prayerful silence for two minutes.

Narrator: Then, at 3:00, we hear Jesus groaning out of the depths, crying loudly, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (*Pause for a few seconds*.) Then he cries out with a loud voice, "It's done . . . complete." (*Pause for a few seconds*.) He's bowing his head now and saying, "Abba, I offer my spirit into your hands."

Second woman: Mary, the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, Jesus' aunt, and Mary his mother are there, standing at the foot of the cross, keeping vigil as Jesus dies.

The worship leaders invite those present to come forward and light a candle from the tall candle and to stand the small candles in the bowl of sand.

Possibly while still gathered around the worship center, sing HWB 250 “Beneath the cross of Jesus” or 252 “O sacred Head, now wounded,” followed by a time of silence. A worship leader asks the group to return to their seats.

Narrator: Late in the afternoon Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus’ body. The women help wrap it in clean linens.

Second woman: We follow and watch as Joseph places the body in his own tomb and arranges for a large stone to be rolled across the entrance. Some of us leave with Joseph.

Narrator: But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary stay, keeping vigil, sitting in plain view of the tomb.

Sing HWB 257, verse 3: “Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?” Pause.

First woman: Around 6:00 the Marys leave to prepare burial spices and perfumes. The Sabbath is about to begin.

At this point, the worship leaders arrange for fragrant candles to be lit throughout the room and pass hand lotion among those present. Offer an invitation to use the lotion, enjoying the fragrance, as a way of being present with the women preparing spices for Jesus’ burial.

Both women from Galilee: Now we rest and wait on the Sabbath, according to the commandment. *(Short pause. In the following passage, have the lights turned back on.)*

Narrator: As the first light of the new week dawns, Mary, Jesus’ mother, and Mary Magdalene return to the tomb, bringing with them the burial spices. To their surprise, they find the entrance stone rolled back from the tomb. Jesus’ body has disappeared. Mary Magdalene goes back outside the tomb and begins to cry. As she weeps, she kneels to look into the tomb once more. Through her tears, she sees two angels sitting there, dressed in white. “Woman, why do you weep?” they ask. “They took my master,” she sobs, “and I don’t know where they put him.”

Second woman: After she says this, she turns and sees Jesus standing there. But she doesn’t recognize him. Jesus asks her gently, “Woman, why do you weep? Who are you looking for?” Mary, thinking it is the gardener, says, “Mister, if you took him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him.” Jesus says, “Mary.” And turning to face him, she says, “Teacher!”

Leader 1: Jesus turns to you now and asks, “Woman, why do you weep?” Be in the presence of Jesus and open your heart to him in these moments of silence. *(Pause here for up to five minutes of meditation.)*

First woman: Then Jesus says to her, “Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I am going to be with Abba, to ascend to my Abba and yours, my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene leaves the garden then and goes to tell the news to the disciples. “I saw the Master!” she exclaims. She tells us everything he said to her.

Sing HWB 257, verse 4: “Were you there when he rose up from the dead?”

Second woman: Later on that day, we women gather with all the other disciples. We are afraid of the Jews and have locked all doors in the house. Suddenly, Jesus is there, standing quietly among us. Our hearts are pounding. Some of us cannot believe it is really him. Most of us are scared. But Jesus says, "Peace to you." Now he is showing us his hands and side, and repeating what he said: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you." Now he takes a deep breath and is breathing into each one of us. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says.

Leader 1: As we join with those early followers of Jesus in that upper room, open your attention to Jesus as he comes to you and breathes into you the Holy Spirit. (*Pause a few moments.*)

Sing HWB 356 "Breathe on me, breath of God."

Leader 2: Let us stand for the benediction:

Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us.

Jesus, Bearer of our sins, have mercy on us.

Jesus, Redeemer of the world, guide us by your Spirit,
and give us peace as we respond to your sending. Amen.

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