

I Am With You Always

*An Easter Program by Pauline Bauman
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Advance Preparation

You will need a worship leader, one to three scripture readers, a song leader, an accompanist if possible, perhaps a soloist, and a candle for each person in your group. To symbolize the resurrection, cover a table with a dark cloth. Layer a bright cloth on top, allowing the edges of the dark cloth to show. Place an Easter lily or other flowers and a large unlit white candle (the Christ candle) on the bright cloth. The candles for each person could also be placed on the table.

If a member of your church is gifted in liturgical dance, you may invite her to do a two-part interpretative movement that begins (during the opening section on this page) with her body wound in a dark cloth, symbolizing both Jesus' graveclothes and how despair binds our spirits. When the worship leader describes the resurrection, the cloth falls away and mourning turns into dancing. This may be done with music in the background or just to the words of the worship leader.

Read and pray slowly, pausing to give time for contemplation.

Program

Leader: The Easter story begins in grief and despair. At another time of despair the writer of Lamentations recalled these words of hope:

Reader: Lamentations 3:21-24.

Leader: The Easter story begins with the heartache of the women who had followed and supported Jesus. A young man whom they loved has been violently killed, unjustly at that. He had so much potential. He had taught them so much and with so much authority. They had hoped he would set Israel free. And now he's gone. Life seems fruitless. What's more, they could not be by his side and care for him as he suffered. They had not been able to prepare his body for burial. They were put at a distance by the horrible circumstances of his death. Toward dawn they take their first opportunity to visit his tomb.

Sing HWB 257 "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" verses 1-4. Adapt the following prayer to fit your group.

Leader: As we remember Jesus' suffering and the pain of those who loved him, let us offer prayers for those who are suffering in this day. During this prayer I will allow several moments for you to name people and situations and to offer silent or verbal prayers as you wish. Then when I say, "In your mercy," as a whole group let's pray, "Lord, hear our prayer."

Gracious God, we come in prayer trusting in your faithfulness, in your unfailing love, in your mercy toward us and all people.

We pray for those who are dying and for those who care for them.

(Pause to name situations and offer prayers.)

We ask for freedom from fear and for trust in eternal life with you.

All: In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for all who mourn and in particular for those who grieve the lives of ones who died too young. *(Pause.)* We ask for your comforting presence.

All: In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for those who suffer from illness. *(Pause.)* We ask for your healing touch.

All: In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for those who suffer violence and those who are crushed by injustice. *(Pause.)* We ask you to push back the forces of evil and give safe space for restoration to wholeness.

All: In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for those in the darkness of despair, those who have lost hope, those whose lives seem fruitless. *(Pause.)* We ask for faithfulness and strength to persevere.

All: In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: God whose mercies are new every morning, we ask for attentiveness to see the light of your faithfulness in our own lives, our communities, and the world, so that we may live with the hope to which you have called us. Amen.

Sing HWB 216 “Christ, whose glory fills the skies.” Read Matthew 28:1-10 and then light the Christ candle.

Leader: Jesus’ resurrection shakes and rearranges the world. The earth trembles; an angel like lightning descends; the guards tremble too, and become like dead men. The women were put at a distance from Jesus during his trial and crucifixion and separated from him by his death, but now they meet Jesus, take hold of him, and worship him. Jesus who was crucified is alive! Sorrow turns to fear and great joy. There is a whole new order.

In the midst of this shake-up both the angel and Jesus tell the women, “Do not be afraid.” In addition, Jesus’ greeting to them means, “Rejoice!” Let go of the fear and experience the joy! The women run to spread the message of his resurrection.

Sing HWB 267 “Christ has arisen, alleluia”; verses 3 and 4 could be sung as a solo, with recorder/drum accompaniment. If you have incorporated a liturgical dancer, she could lead part or all of the group in a simple circle dance as they repeat the refrain. Or sing another hymn celebrating the joy of Jesus’ resurrection; one possibility is Hymnal Subscription Service 864 “The Lord is my light.”

Reader: Matthew 28:16-20.

Leader: Jesus who was crucified is alive and will be with us always, every day until the end of time. One way to represent Jesus’ presence with us is with light. I invite you to come forward to receive a lighted candle and a blessing reminding you that Jesus is always with us.

Depending on the number of people in your group have one to three leaders light candles from the Christ candle and give this blessing as each person receives a candle: “This wax will melt away, but Jesus has promised to be with you always, to the end of the age.”

Leader: Please take these candles home with you and light them during times of prayer. Each time you relight your candle, remember Jesus’ words, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Sing in benediction HWB 433 “Go, my children.”