

Taking Up the Cross



Matthew 16:21-28
Year A Proper 17

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5	6
▲	Jesus	▲		▲		▲	
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲				▲	
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲				▲	
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲				▲	
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus		▲				▲
▲	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past		▲				▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples		▲				▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room			■			●
▲	Nathanael - Phillip's crass bully of an older brother, who joins Jesus in search of redemption and nobler life				▲		
●	Susanna - the more conventionally-minded friend of Joanna, who, like her friend, left her home to become a disciple				▲		
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts				▲		

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Judas , Matthew

{Jesus meets with the disciples, speaking to them in a solemn tone of voice all the way through this scene.}

Jesus Gather around. I have some important matters to discuss with you. The most important yet, it may be. Gather around, everybody!

James *[to Judas in a whisper]* This is it! He's going to announce his Day!

Judas *[in a low voice]* Do you think so? It was just last week that he ran away from that crowd that tried to make him king.

Matthew *[in a low voice]* I've been studying the scriptures on that. It couldn't have happened there. It has to be Jerusalem.

Judas Really?

Matthew "The Lord you seek, the messenger of the Covenant, shall come suddenly to his temple."

Judas And the only legitimate temple is in Jerusalem.

James So he wasn't rejecting the kingship, just the place!

Jesus My dear friends, I want to thank you all for following me all this time. But a new time, a new phase, will soon be upon us, and I want you to know ahead of time what it will be like.

Judas *[to himself]* My God, it's really happening.

Matthew As it was written in the prophets!

Jesus The time is coming soon when I will go to Jerusalem.

James *[out loud]* Yes! *[to the group after an embarrassed pause]* Uh, sorry. *[to Jesus]* Sorry, rabbi. Go on.

Jesus In Jerusalem, I will suffer greatly at the hands of the religious leaders, and they will put me to death -

{At that, everyone explodes into confusion. Everybody should say their lines simulataneously, including Jesus, who tries to calm them down and communicate the last part of his message, with Judas' final "QUIET!!!" finally getting their attention.}

James *[simultaneously with everybody else]* What? Are you joking with us? Are

you messing with us? I've followed you faithfully since the beginning, I got in on the ground floor when nobody else believed in you, and I think I deserve better!

Matthew *[simultaneously with everybody else]* But...But..."The Lord you seek shall come suddenly to his temple! And who may abide the day of his coming? For he will come in swift judgment against the adulterers and liars and oppressors, those who turn away the stranger!"

Jesus *[simultaneously with everybody else]* Hear me! Please! Hear me! I will die, but I will rise again, on the third day! Listen! On the third day...

Judas *[simultaneously with everybody else]* Rabbi, what do you mean by that? James, will quiet down and let him continue? Matthew, stop spouting scripture! Mary! Mary, are you all right? Hey! Hey, everybody! QUIET!!!

{Judas' final cry quiets them.}

Judas It's Mary. She's fainted!

Scene 2

Joanna , John , Mary

{Joanna and John carry Mary into one of the tents, where she revives.}

Joanna Mary, are you all right?

Mary I think so. Wasn't the rabbi speaking to us?

John He was. Then...then we all went kind of crazy.

Joanna That's exactly how it felt! Suddenly, we were all shouting - including me...I think.

Mary So there *was* shouting. I thought it was the roar of blood in my ears.

John I don't even remember what I shouted. It was like I went into a sudden panic.

Joanna What was the last thing you remember the rabbi saying? Was it...

Mary That he was going to die?

John No! What? He said that?

Joanna That's what caused the panic.

Mary It can't be true!

John I do remember something about suffering at the hands of the religious leaders. Did he explicitly say "die"?

Joanna He did. I'm sure of it.

John Then we need to ask him about it, find out exactly what he meant.

Mary *[with a little panic edging her voice]* I don't want to. I don't want to know!

Joanna *[to John]* Are you sure that *you* do?

John Of course, why wouldn't I?

Joanna Well...in my experience, when a group of people react like we did: freaking out, forgetting what they heard or said, fainting...it's because someone has spoken the unspeakable, someone's forced them to consider the unthinkable. Groups have their taboos, and I think it's very understandable one of this group's is the idea that the rabbi might leave us.

John I can see that, but if that's what he said, then -

Mary Please! Can we not talk about it any more?

John Of course. We're sorry; we'll let you get some rest.

Joanna *[in a low voice to John]* Listen. Don't bring it up with the group so soon. Give it a day. I'll bet you that no one else will mention it all day, that they'll avoid the subject in fact. Then after that, you can decide if you want to be the one to do it.

John All right. But I think you're wrong about the group. Of course we don't want to entertain the idea of any harm coming to the rabbi, but I think we're strong enough to -

{Just then, a commotion sounds from outside the tent.}

Mary What's that?

Joanna It's Peter. Arguing with the rabbi, it sounds like!

John Should we let them know we're in here and can hear them?

Joanna Shhh! This may be the first test of my theory!

Scene 3

Jesus , Peter

{Peter tries to get Jesus to pull himself together.}

Peter *[with urgency and something almost like anger]* Cheer up, is all I'm saying!

Jesus *[mildly and a little sadly]* Is it?

Peter What I'm saying is that you have to have faith!

Jesus In what?

Peter In your friends, for one thing. Do you think for a minute that we'd let anything happen to you? Or is it that you don't think we're up for anything they throw at us?

Jesus You never know how you'll react until the moment comes.

Peter You think we're going to chicken out? Is that it? After all we've been through with you, you think we'd abandon you when the fighting started? That we'd betray you like that?

Jesus I might betray myself.

Peter Don't say that! Don't even think it! Have faith in *yourself*. Look at all the miracles you've been doing. You healed people just by them touching your cloak! You walked on water. You stilled the storm! If you could defeat the power of the storm that hit us that night, how could anything else in this world hurt you?

Jesus It's hard to imagine.

Peter That's right! In fact, if a Roman soldier ran you through right now with his sword, you could probably heal yourself in a blink of an eye, couldn't you?

Jesus I could.

Peter If a battalion of Roman soldiers came marching against you, you could probably *raise* a storm and blow them back to Rome.

Jesus The winds would obey my command.

Peter Hell, you could call down an army of angels, or fire from heaven, and just wipe out the whole Roman empire right now, couldn't you?

Jesus It's a terrible power to have.

Peter So what are you worrying about? Nothing can touch you! God! Do you know how much every man would like that power? You could fix everything. You could set the world to rights with a wave of a hand. You'd never have to suffer so much as a hang nail!

Jesus *[suddenly furious]* Stop! Begone, Satan!

Peter *[in a small, hurt voice]* Satan?

Jesus *[with growing anger]* You're always trying to trip me up, for you see things from a human, not a heavenly, point of view! Begone! Get thee behind me!

Scene 4

Nathanael , Susanna , Thomas

{Some of the other disciples discuss that morning's events.}

Nathanael *[cheerfully]* What a crazy morning.

Susanna You said it. Does anybody know how Mary's doing?

Thomas She's still resting, but she's better.

Nathanael Good. I can't believe she fainted.

Susanna Well, it was a pretty exciting talk.

Thomas You found the rabbi's talk...exciting?

Nathanael Didn't you? I mean, think about it: we're going to Jerusalem!

Susanna To be honest, I'm excited, but also a little nervous.

Thomas Going to Jerusalem? Was that all you heard?

Nathanael Well, things did get a little chaotic right about then.

Susanna Yes, it was the strangest thing. Suddenly, I couldn't follow anything anyone was saying.

Thomas Well, did you hear what the rabbi said *after* the part about going to Jerusalem?

Nathanael It was kind of heard to hear, but I'm sure he'll repeat it if it was important.

Susanna What did you hear him say?

Thomas [*with great reluctance*] Well...he said he was going to Jerusalem, and that things...were going to be difficult there.

Nathanael Well of course! No one expecting the Roman's to roll out a red carpet.

Thomas He said the religious leaders would...oppose him..and that they'd...what I heard him say was that they'd put him to death.

Susanna [*angrily*] That's a terrible thing to say about the rabbi!

Nathanael Dude, I know they call you the Doubter, but that's just sick!

Thomas I'm not saying it. It's what I heard *him* say.

Susanna [*scornfully*] Why would the rabbi say something like that? Why would any man announce that he's going to be killed?

Nathanael Especially *that* man! He's the Messiah! [*sarcastically*] Oh, but I forgot: you don't believe that.

Thomas I'm begining to doubt *myself* now. [*meekly*] Maybe I heard him wrong.

Susanna [*warmly*] Of course you did! Such a crazy thought!

Nathanael [*magnanimously*] Don't worry; we won't tell on you. Just try to have more faith from now on, or at least pretend to!

Scene 5

James , Jesus , Judas , Matthew

{Jesus reconvenes the group to continue his talk.}

Jesus I'd like to continue our talk from this morning.

James Do we really need to do that? I think everybody got the message all right.

Jesus Really? Even at the very end?

Matthew We understand the plan.

Judas And it might be best to discuss...the details in private, just amongst the leadership.

Jesus Is that all right with everybody? Peter, what about you? You were very adamant earlier that we should talk it through.

{Peter doesn't reply.}

James Peter! The rabbi's talking to you!

Matthew Peter, are you all right?

Judas I think we can take his silence as consent.

Jesus Very well. It's your choice.

Matthew Let's hear the next thing. What's your next lesson for us?

Jesus All who wish to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross. They must be ready to die to all their hopes and dreams, all their expectations even about the Kingdom. They must relinquish power, and control, and all those things life trains you to cling to. They must follow me into death. For what good will it be to gain the whole world, and yet lose your soul? And what would you give in exchange for eternal life? Nevertheless, I will say this: the Son of Man will come in glory with his angels to repay all according to their acts, and there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see it!

{Jesus exits.}

James *[triumphantly]* Yes! Now we're talking!

Judas Was the dying he spoke of earlier purely metaphorical, then? You both heard him earlier, I assume.

Matthew *[solemnly]* I did, and didn't want to even talk about it. I didn't want to hear it again. But I'm relieved that he's speaking now about victory.

Judas You're sure it was all metaphorical?

James Of course! It's about dying to yourself - which we've all done already! We've left everything to follow him. We are *there*!

Matthew That last part did *not* sound like a metaphor, and didn't sound very pleasant, either. "Some" he said. "Some" of us will live to see the Kingdom. It implies that most of us won't make it.

Judas We knew that coming in. If anybody thought we could free ourselves from the Romans without heavy casualties, it's just as well they're disabused of their delusions now.

James Instead of crying over the ones who won't make it, think about the ones that will. Just imagine what they'll see: The rabbi in his glory, the Romans ground to dust, and the angels of God coming down from Heaven!

Scene 6

Joanna , John , Mary , Peter

{John, Joanna, and Mary try to console Peter.}

Peter *[glumly]* "Satan", he called me. The Devil!

John He can't have been talking about you. He was going off on one of his rants, is all.

Joanna I swear, that man is driving me crazy. Just when I think, "Yes, he *is* the Messiah, and I'm going to follow him to the end," he pulls a stunt like this.

Mary You can't leave! Didn't you hear him today? He's going to Jerusalem! He's going to need all our help.

Peter He told *me* to "begone".

John He didn't mean it. He was speaking figuratively.

Peter What does that even mean?

Joanna Figuratively nothing! What he said to you was a terrible thing, but did you even consider that he was simply wrong to say it? That you are not, in fact, a devil?

Peter He's the rabbi. And the Messiah. And my leader.

Joanna He's also human.

Mary *[in sudden realization]* He was just like us!

John How do you mean?

Mary He heard something he didn't want to hear, and he went crazy. For just a moment. Just like we did this morning!

Joanna That's exactly what it looked like! But what could have set him off? All Peter did was tell him to buck up. Since when is "You're not going to die" the terrible secret that freaks a man out when it's finally spoken aloud?

John And yet, it seemed to work. He was like a different person just now, talking about coming into his Kingdom in glory.

Mary *[to Peter]* It was because of you! The change in him!

Joanna How about *that*, Mister Thinks-He's-The-Devil? You might just have saved the nation!

Peter *[darkly but with revived humor]* Now *I* think Satan's talking through *you*!

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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