

The Watchers



*Matthew 24:42-51; Mark
13:34-37; Luke 12:32-48*

Year C Proper 14

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Parts by scene

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

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▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲
▲	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	▲
▲	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	▲
▲	Jesus	▲

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter , Thomas

{James, Thomas, and Peter enter, in the middle of a debate.}

James I'm telling you, it wasn't about us. It was meant for the crowd!

Thomas But there was something about the way he said it.

James If he meant it for us, wouldn't he have said it to us in private?
Why preach a sermon he meant just for us to a hundred
strangers?

Peter Who knows what he'd do? Half the time, I have no idea who he's talking to, and the other half, I have no idea what he's saying!

{John, Joanna, and Judas enter.}

John What you are arguing about?

Peter The rabbi told a parable in town today, and Thomas thinks it was meant for us.

Judas They're all meant for everybody, aren't they? And everybody includes us, last I checked.

Thomas I know, but I still think there was something more to it. It was like that time James and Judas had that falling out, and the next day, the rabbi talked to the crowd about how important it was to live together in peace.

James Wait, what? That was meant for us?

Judas Of course it was! Didn't you wonder why I apologized to you that night?

James Because I was right and you were wrong!

Joanna What was the parable?

Thomas It was about a rich man who had to attend a wedding and left his servants in charge of the house, and they were supposed to stay up and wait for him to get back no matter how late it got, even if he stayed out all night.

Judas That was it? I don't see anything especially pointed at us.

James Wasn't there more to it? Something about a robbery.

John Ah! That would make sense. The servants fell asleep, and the man returned to find his house had been robbed, right?

Judas So the man is the rabbi, and the servants are us. And he's put his house -- his teachings? his work? the people we minister to? - - in our charge, and he's warning us not to fall asleep on the job. Not to let his teachings be lost or forgotten, or allow any harm

to come to his flock.

- Joanna** If that's what the rabbi meant, I have to say: I don't think it's a very good parable. Wouldn't it be better for the man to give some treasure of his into the servants' charge?
- James** What are you saying, that the rabbi isn't a good teacher? His parables are perfect, every one of them, and if we're having problems understanding one, it's our fault!
- Thomas** You know, I forgot all about the robbery part. I didn't think the message was about protecting anything at all. It was about watching for the owner to return. The servants were supposed to wait so they could open the door for him. And at the end, the rabbi said to be ready, because we don't know when the Son of Man will come.
- James** See? It *was* about the crowd. We're already with him. When he came to each of us, we were ready: we recognized him and left our nets to join him. He was telling the crowd to be ready when he comes to *them*.
- Joanna** Thomas, what was it that made you think he was addressing us?
- Thomas** It was the way he said something. He said "it would be good" if the servants were found still awake when the rabbi appeared, and when he said it, I felt like he was looking right at us.
- John** That *does* sound like him sending us a pointed message, but what's the message?
- Thomas** That something big is about to happen. That even though we did recognize him, and even though we've remained with him, we've gotten...lazy, we're falling asleep on the watch right now. That when this big thing happens, we might miss it. We might be left out.
- Joanna** What's the big thing?
- Thomas** I don't know. And that's what's been haunting me! If I don't even know what it is, I'm probably going to miss it.

{They all fall silent, pondering the question.}

James Jerusalem.

Judas Of course!

Joanna Jerusalem?

John The Day. The Day is at hand once more.

Thomas Now that I think about it, he began by telling the crowd to sell its possessions and give the money to the poor!

Judas Because very soon, the world will be changed!

Joanna Okay, I can see that, but there's still something I'm puzzled about: the robbery. How does that fit in?

James I wish I could remember the rabbi's exact words about that.

Peter "Understand this: if the owner had known the exact time the thief was coming, he wouldn't have let him break in."

{Everyone looks in surprise at Peter.}

John Those were his exact words?

Thomas They sound right.

James *[to Peter]* How did you of all people remember them?

Peter It was my favorite part of the sermon. It got me thinking about what I'd do if I knew a thief was coming to rob my house. Do you keep the lights on and post a guard? No, because you'll just scare the thief away and he'll wait for you to let down your guard again. Do you lay in wait for him? Then you might get killed and not just robbed, or you might kill your cousin who's paying you a surprise visit.

Judas Anyway...the parable.

John Yes, it complicates things.

James No it doesn't. While watching for the Day to come, we also have to be on guard against anything or anyone that would steal it away, that would wreck things so it doesn't happen after all.

Joanna But according to Peter, it was the owner who should have done something to stop the thieves, not the servants. If the *owner* had known, *he* wouldn't have gone away, etc.

Thomas And if the owner of the house is the rabbi, or God, wouldn't he know when the thief was coming?

{A long silence while they everyone continues to rack their brains.}

Judas I've got it! Is there any chance the rabbi really told two parables, and you're conflating them in your memory?

James No, I'm sure it was just one.

Thomas Me, too. Or pretty sure.

John *[to Judas]* Why does it make a difference?

Judas It removes the problem of the robbery! We've been getting nowhere because we've been assuming that the owner who told his servants to wait up for him and the owner who got burglarized are the same person in the same story, but what if there were really two stories, and they just happened to each have a homeowner who goes out?

Joanna I see! Then the stories are really about the same thing: Watchfulness.

Judas Exactly. In the first story, the servants are supposed to watch for the return of the owner. In the second, the owner is supposed to watch for the appearance of the thief.

John And it was confusing because in the first story, we (or the crowd) are the servants, and this big thing we're supposed to be watching for is the owner, but in the second, the owner is us, and the big thing that's coming is the thief.

Peter Hey, even *I* understand it now!

James That's all very well, but there weren't two parables. Just one.

Joanna In that case, maybe it was the rabbi who conflated them.

Thomas What do you mean?

Joanna Suppose he wanted to preach about watchfulness, and thought up the first parable to make his point. He begins telling it - the owner commands the servants to wait up for him, etc., etc. - but halfway through, he gets another idea for the parable - instead of servants watching for the owner, it could be the owner watching for a thief - and he mixes that into his sermon without making it as clear as he might have to the crowd that this was a new parable.

John That does solve the problem!

Thomas I can totally see that.

James *[outraged]* No!

Peter *[to James]* Why not?

James You're basically saying the rabbi made a mistake!

Joanna No, not really. His sermon just could have been better organized.

John It was probably the first time he'd told those parables. I know I never heard them before. If he thought them up on the spur of the moment, it's understandable that he might get them a bit mixed up at first.

James No! No! No! He's the Messiah! The Anointed One of God! How could he make a mistake - or a "mixup"?

Joanna *[deferentially]* I'm sorry. I'm new here, and I don't know the scriptures like you do. Is it written somewhere that the Messiah will be infallible?

{James is stunned into a long silence.}

Thomas Um, sorry James, but I just thought of another odd part of the parable. The rabbi said that when the owner of the house got back and found his servants awake, he'd reward them by becoming *their* servant and waiting on them. At the time, I thought, What owner has ever done that in the history of the world? But now, I'm wondering if it was also, um, not the best choice.

Judas Maybe the point is that it *will* happen - for the first time in history, as it were. Maybe when he comes into his kingdom, he'll be completely unlike any king who ever ruled on earth, or any owner who ever kept servants. *He'll* be the servant, and his rule will be entirely for the good of the people.

Joanna May it be so. But if that's what the rabbi meant, I think he could have chosen a better analogy, something that really happens in the world. Maybe a son waiting for his father, or a bride for the bridegroom.

James *[almost in panic]* Stop! You can't criticize the rabbi's teaching any more. You can't! We're being just like those servants. We're supposed to be watching and waiting, but instead, we're sitting around criticizing, and if we're not careful, the owner is going to come home when we least expect it and -

{Jesus enters suddenly. Upon his first word, everyone else in the scene should cry out in surprise.}

Jesus *[interrupting James]* Peace!

everybody *[crying out in surprise]* Ahhhhhhhhhh!

{A long silence.}

Thomas Um. How did the preaching go after we left?

Jesus The people listened politely, even eagerly, but many failed to hear what they needed to hear.

{Another silence. Everybody's reluctant to admit they were arguing or criticizing or not understanding.}

Jesus How were things here?

Judas We were discussing the parable of the house owner.

Jesus Ah yes. Is there anything you'd like to ask me about it?

{A short silence before James asserts himself.}

James No. We got it.

Jesus Good. Well, it's been a long day and I'm going to bed.

{He begins walking off}

Joanna Rabbi, wait!

Jesus Yes?

{Joanna is suddenly afraid to make her criticism. After an uncomfortable pause, Peter comes to her rescue.}

Peter We did have a question.

Jesus Good! Ask it.

Peter Was today's sermon meant especially for us, or was it meant for the whole crowd?

Jesus The owner of a house had to go out to a banquet and instructed his servants to wait up for his return. And believe me, it was in their interest to be found faithful when the rabbi returned, because he was planning to deed the entire house over to them! Instead, the servants took advantage of the owner's absence to throw a wild party and trash the house, and they beat up their fellow servants who tried to stop them. Now, what do you think the owner did when he got home at an unexpected hour and caught them in the act?

James I would have put those servants to the sword!

Jesus Well answered. But not all the misbehaving servants were under orders from the owner to watch for him. Some of them didn't even know he was gone, and some who knew he was gone had no idea he'd be coming back. And some of them didn't know him at all. All they knew were the higher ranking servants set over them. Now, my question is: Should those servants be punished as severely as the first?

Peter Of course not.

Judas The ones who knew more had the greater culpability.

Jesus Well answered again! And now: are *you* answered?

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