

# A SUNRISE PAGEANT

*by Rhonda Wray*



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# *A Sunrise Pageant*

An Easter morning program for children

by Rhonda Wray

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

PASTOR

OFF-STAGE VOICE

READER 1

READER 2

READER 3

READER 4

READER 5

READER 6

READER 7

(The above readers should be teens or adults  
with strong, clear voices.)

GIRL 1

BOY 1

GIRL 2

BOY 2

GIRL 3

BOY 3

GIRL 4

(The number of children used is optional, but you must  
have a minimum of seven.)

## PRODUCTION NOTES

Although written for a sunrise service, this pageant may be done as part of an Easter morning breakfast or in the Easter worship service. It may either be staged indoors or outside, depending on your church's preference.

The seven last "words" that Christ spoke as he died on the Cross are endlessly fascinating and ever ripe for speculation: What was he thinking when he said those words? What might they say to us today? Though many, many sermons have been preached on the topic, these words are full of interpretive possibilities. Though none of us completely knows the mind of Christ, attempting to surmise what he may have been thinking as he said his last words brings new dimension to the familiar words.

This presentation orally and visually illustrates the joy of Christ's Easter Resurrection following his Good Friday death using his seven last words and various related Scriptures. An Off-stage voice repeats Christ's last words reverently and with feeling. Then seven adult readers reflect upon each phrase, bridging the gap between this event that changed the course of history and our contemporary lives. After each "last word" is read and reflected upon, children repeat a joyful "promise" that corresponds to each phrase. Then, using flowers, they gradually transform a stark, bare cross into a thing of beauty by filling it with their bouquets.

Children's parts are brief for easy memorization. The adult readers may read from the script at a podium. The children all enter from the same side, carrying their bouquets and walking to Center Stage on cue with the narrative. After their biblical quotation lines are spoken, they step back to form a line behind the cross.

The number of children that may be involved is adjustable. The script calls for seven, but many more may be used. Each Sunday school class in the children's department could memorize one of the verses. For the performance, several representatives from each class could recite the verses in unison, then fill in the cross with their flowers.

The children may wear white robes, to symbolize light and life, while the adult readers may wear dark choir robes, symbolizing darkness and (Christ's) death. Children may wear their festive Easter clothing in lieu of white robes.

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To make the cross, purchase several coils of grapevine, such as that used in wreaths, from a craft supply or hobby store. We suggest three or more, depending on how large you want your cross to be. We used three coils to create a cross about 54" high with a crosspiece about 25" wide. To make the grapevine pliable enough to form into a cross shape, soak it in a large pail of water overnight. The next day you will need either two dowels or two 1" x 1" boards — one long and the other shorter for the crosspiece. Nail the two together to make a cross shape.

The next day, take the wet grapevine and form it to fit your cross frame. You will need to bend some of the pieces. Secure the grapevines to the frame using nails, rubber bands, or brown tape. Let dry for several days, checking periodically to make sure the vines are drying in the cross shape. You may have to retrain some strands, as the grapevine may tend to curl when drying. By nature, the grapevine will never be completely straight, but a definite cross shape should be visible.

After the cross dries, you may need to cover any wood, nails, rubber bands, or tape that shows through with brown paint. Remember, when the congregation first sees the cross, it will not have any flowers on it, and while it will look plain, you want it to look presentable.

Next, set the cross upright and decide on a visible location for it in the center of your playing area. We used a Christmas tree stand draped in purple cloth and set it on the floor. You may wish to set the cross on your Communion table or a low table of some kind for visibility, but make sure it isn't too high for the children to reach. If you will be performing outdoors, you may be able to "plant" the cross in the ground.

You will need plenty of silk flowers and dried baby's breath. Make sure the flower stems are long for easy insertion between the strands of grapevine. (Silk flowers are easier to insert than real flowers.) Use medium-sized to large flowers, such as lilies, as they fill up the space better.

Form the flowers and baby's breath into small bouquets, one for each child. Put the tallest flower at the back and fan out the sides. Secure with tape. We used a variety of colors, but you could use either all white flowers or a combination based on your church's decor.

When you rehearse, be sure to practice the inserting of flowers in the grapevine cross. Each child (or group of children) should understand where to place his or her flowers. We recommend starting from the bottom and working upward. The objective is to completely cover the cross with flowers by the end of the pageant. For the crowning bouquet at the top, use a tall, stalk-like flower. Ours had some pointed buds at the top and this helped to visually extend the top of the cross.

When the children fill the entire cross with flowers at the end of the pageant, you are left with a beautiful decoration that may be used for the regular Easter worship service. (During the time between the two services, a Sunday school teacher may rearrange the flowers to cover any “holes” or fill in with additional baby's breath if necessary.)

### **SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST**

(Spoken by Off-stage voice)

1. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)
2. “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)
3. “Dear woman, here is your son.” “(John), here is your mother.” (John 19:26-27)
4. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)
5. “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)
6. “It is finished.” (John 19:30)
7. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

## LINES TO BE SPOKEN BY THE CHILDREN

You may want to reproduce copies of this page to give to each of the children who carry flowers and recite a line of Scripture. Put a check in front of the lines assigned for memorization and give a copy to each child.

GIRL 1: (Page 2) “Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

BOY 1: (Page 3) “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).

GIRL 2: (Page 3) “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (II Corinthians 6:18).

BOY 2: (Page 4) “O Lord, where can I go from your Spirit? If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there — your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. You will never leave me nor forsake me” (Psalm 139:7, 9-10; Joshua 1:5, adapted).

(This is the longest speech of any assigned to the children. Give this part to a child who memorizes easily and performs well.)

GIRL 3: (Page 5) “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

BOY 3: (Page 6) “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 9:6).

GIRL 4: (Page 7) “We know that we live in (Christ) and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).

ALL CHILDREN: (Page 7) “He is not here! He is risen!” (Matthew 28:6, Luke 24:6, adapted).



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**PASTOR:** Welcome to our sunrise service. (*PASTOR may insert additional opening remarks.*) When we last met, we reflected upon our Lord as he experienced death by crucifixion. But like spring after the harshness of winter or today's beautiful sunrise after a cold, dark night, this seeming end was really a beginning. "Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands, for our offenses given. But now at God's right hand he stands, and brings us life from heaven." (*Gesturing to the cross*) The Cross has been a powerful symbol for Christians ever since Christ's crucifixion. Let us now turn our attention to the Cross as we remember Christ's seven last words before he died, a victim of Roman crucifixion. Then, in keeping with the joyful tone of this sunrise service, our church children will follow each of Jesus' last phrases with a corresponding promise of hope and peace that he has given us, his followers.

# I.

**OFF-STAGE VOICE:** "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (*Luke 23:34*).

**READER 1:** Facing death would have been difficult enough, but Jesus faced his death amid insults, ridicule, and hatred. Jesus? A king? The Roman soldiers were greatly amused by his claim. Every king must have fine clothing, and so they dressed him in an elegant robe. Every king must have a crown, and so they made him a crown — of thorns. Every king needs a title, and so they made him a sign: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Judas betrayed him. Peter denied knowing him. The crowd cursed and mocked him. Yes, retaliation would have been justified — even expected — yet Jesus forgave them, every one. "They do not know what they are doing." He actually took pity on those who hurt him. It was as if he was telling his Father, "You must excuse them. They're mixed up. They are frightened. They just don't know any better." And this same kind of loving

forgiveness extends to us as well for the times we are thoughtless or selfish or have willingly disobeyed what we knew to be right, This forgiveness restores strained relationships and mends broken hearts. This is the kind of forgiveness we need to extend to others.

**GIRL 1:** (*Enters holding flowers and moves to a position Center Stage and repeats her Bible verse.*) “Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (*Colossians 3:13*). (*GIRL 1 inserts her flowers in the cross toward the bottom, then steps back to be the first in a line.*)

## II.

**OFF-STAGE VOICE:** “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (*Luke 23:43*).

**READER 2:** Oh, the irony of it all ... Jesus, the only man who was ever without sin, hung dying on a cross between two criminals. One criminal taunted Jesus until the end. But the other one reprimanded him: “We are punished justly, for we are getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” And then he turned to Christ and made his plea: “Jesus, when you get to heaven, remember me.” “Remember me,” he said, echoing Jesus' own words to his disciples as they broke bread for the last time. The criminal knew he certainly didn't deserve a place in heaven, and he didn't presume that Jesus would save a place for him there. He simply asked to be remembered when Jesus arrived, because he knew he didn't stand a chance of getting there himself. A life of insurrection and crime isn't exactly considered an ideal ticket to the kingdom of God. So imagine his incredulousness at Jesus' reply: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” To be more specific, “Not only will I remember you when I go to heaven, but I'll see you there.” Isn't that just like God's grace? We all, as sheep, have gone astray. We don't deserve eternal life any more than the criminal did. But that undeservedness makes it all the sweeter. In Jesus' eyes,

the bottom line is not the list of wrongs we have committed — it is the state of our hearts.

BOY 1: (*With his flowers, he walks to Center Stage and recites his verse.*) “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (*Revelation 2:7*). (*BOY 1 places his flowers in the cross above GIRL 1’s and takes his place in line beside her.*)

### III.

OFF-STAGE VOICE: “Dear woman, here is your son. (John), here is your mother” (*John 19:26-27*).

READER 3: The parent-child bond ... there is none stronger. Think of Mary. She had nurtured Jesus from the time he was a tiny infant lying amid straw in a feeding trough for stable animals. She had raised him in Nazareth, watched him grow and learn the carpentry trade, and was amazed along with everyone else at his power to heal and preach. Now she saw him in his darkest hour. The pain must have been unbearable, but what could she do? She knew he was fulfilling God’s plan for humanity. Now imagine how Jesus was feeling. One might suppose that as Jesus hung on the cross, he was thinking about the state he was in — human thoughts, such as how much it hurt. Yet he looked down at his mother standing by his beloved disciple John and said, “Take care of each other. I don’t want either of you to be alone. I want you to be cared for.” And then, in his dying, he took care of all of the rest of us as well. By laying down his life for us, his friends, he was saying, “I know you have been through hard times. I know you aren’t all you want to be. I know your record isn’t perfect. But I don’t want you to be alone. I want to make a way out for you. After all, we’re like family.”

GIRL 2: “ ‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty” (*II Corinthians 6:18*). (*GIRL 2 places her flowers in the cross above BOY 1’s and takes her place beside him in the line.*)

## IV.

OFF-STAGE VOICE: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34*).

READER 4: Jesus understood the fickleness of the human spirit. It was his understanding and compassion that allowed him to forgive the wrongs of Judas, Peter, the soldiers, the crowd ... the whole lot of those who let him down. But his Father? Where was God now, when it hurt the most? He had already resigned himself to enduring the turmoil that lay ahead when he prayed in the garden, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken away from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Still, though he knew in his head he was fulfilling his destiny, he must have felt utterly, completely alone in his heart. What happened when Jesus questioned God? Did God cause the heavens to open and send a legion of angels to rescue him? Not exactly. There was no obvious answer. Life's cruel twists and turns do not always make sense. Sometimes we feel utterly abandoned by everyone, including God. Yet through his plaintive cry, Jesus is saying he's experienced loneliness and confusion. He understands. And though the days can be dark and life can be wearisome, and though we do not always recognize the presence of God, he is always there for us.

BOY 2: (*Walks to Center Stage and places his flowers above GIRL 2's, then repeats his verse.*) "O Lord, where can I go from your Spirit? ... If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. You will never leave me nor forsake me" (*Psalms 139:7, 9-10; Joshua 1:5*). (*BOY 2 takes his place beside GIRL 2 in the line.*)

1  
2  
3 OFF-STAGE VOICE; “I am thirsty” (*John 19:28*).

4 READER 5: If ever there was a time when we recognize  
5 Jesus’ humanity, it is in those words. Jesus, though our  
6 Messiah, part of God himself, wasn’t spared from the  
7 pain humans experience. He experienced cruelty from  
8 the crowds and the soldiers. He knew firsthand how  
9 loneliness feels when he asked his best friends to be  
10 with him as he prayed in the garden — and they fell  
11 asleep. He knew physical sensations: hunger, sleep, and  
12 pain. It has been said that of all Christ’s last words  
13 spoken on the cross, “I am thirsty” is likely the only  
14 phrase that you or I would have said in a similar  
15 situation. If we were in agony, would we ask the Father  
16 for forgiveness for our attackers? Would we speak with  
17 a criminal of Paradise? Probably not. But sheer,  
18 physical thirst? Yes — that we would ask for.  
19 Sometimes we may think an omniscient God is too big,  
20 too far up in heaven to remember or care about our  
21 petty details, our doubts, our physical aches and pains,  
22 our disappointments. But remember — Jesus thirsted.  
23 He felt the same range of emotions and sensations that  
24 you and I do. And he knows we also thirst for many  
25 intangible things: love, approval, peace, success, doing  
26 what is pleasing to him. He knows and he cares.

27 GIRL 3: (*Walks to Center Stage and places her flowers on one end of*  
28 *the crosspiece, then says her verse.*) “Whoever drinks the  
29 water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I  
30 give him will become in him a spring of water welling  
31 up to eternal life” (*John 4:14*). (*GIRL 3 takes her place beside*  
32 *BOY 2.*)  
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*by Rhonda Wray.*

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