

ORDINARY SINNERS

by Louise Munro Foley



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Ordinary Sinners

A drama for Holy Week

by Louise Munro Foley

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(with costumes and props)

JOAN

Thirty-seven. Attorney. Pretty, smartly dressed, carries briefcase.

KENNETH

Sixty-four. Wears a business suit, carries a raincoat.

BRAD

*Nineteen. College freshman.
Blue jeans, pro-basketball team T-shirt, running shoes.*

ANNE

Early fifties. Pastor. Wears a robe, carries a Bible.

NARRATOR

Off-stage.

JESUS

Off-stage.

CHOIR

SOLOIST

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Ordinary Sinners is a service of stories, Scripture, and songs for Holy Week where the Gospel meets the here and now. These personal stories will involve your audience in a powerful way as they meet Joan, the attorney; Kenneth, the businessman; Brad, the college freshman; and Anne, the pastor. By turns confessional and conflicted, each character shares a mini-monolog on the way things are while standing by a rough-hewn cross. For Joan, it's the discrepancy between her outward poise and inward fear. For Kenneth, it's relating to a son whose convictions differ from his. Brad must deal with the unexpected death of his father. Anne seriously questions her motives. Their struggles mirror our own inadequacies and failures as imperfect — yet forgiven — people. Interspersed with each story are parallel moments from Christ's last week.

The play takes place on the chancel floor and steps. You will need a large (eight feet or taller) rough-hewn cross that has been constructed out of railroad ties or something similar. The cross is positioned away from the center, toward one side. Blocks or benches of different heights are placed in a semicircle around the cross for the actors to sit on when they finish their lines. The choir may stand in the rear of the sanctuary, in the balcony, or off to one side.

There are four hymns specified in the script: “Just as I Am,” “I Need Thee Every Hour,” “Amazing Grace,” and “What Wondrous Love Is This.” They are traditional standards that may be found in many hymnals or through Internet searches.

1 JESUS: (*From Off-stage*) Little children, yet a little while I am
 2 with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews
 3 so now I say to you, "Where I am going you cannot
 4 come." A new commandment I give to you, that you love
 5 one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love
 6 one another. By this all people will know that you are
 7 my disciples, if you have love for one another (John
 8 13:33-35). (*JOAN enters.*)

9 NARRATOR: (*From Off-stage*) This is Joan. Thirty-seven.
 10 Twice divorced. Phi Beta Kappa. Attorney. Party girl.
 11 Faithful church member.

12 JOAN: (*Walks around cross.*) You know, I wish I'd been around
 13 to defend him. (*Faces congregation without "seeing" them.*)
 14 I'm one of the best defense lawyers on the West Coast.
 15 Maybe *the* best. Certainly the best woman! (*Laughs to*
 16 *herself.*) That doesn't sound humble enough for a
 17 Christian, does it?

18 Well, I'm not your average Christian. I'm not sure
 19 that there is an average Christian. Sometimes I wonder
 20 why I hang around the church at all. (*Pause*) No, that's
 21 not true. Actually, I hang around because I'm looking ...
 22 always looking ... for a chink in the armor of piety.

23 And every once in a while I stumble across somebody
 24 real. Somebody without the religious trappings. But
 25 that doesn't happen often. You know, I may not fit the
 26 Christian mold, but I have as much right to be here as
 27 anyone. I was raised in the church ... and the Bible says
 28 he died for me, too, despite my poor track record.

29 It's hard being the first one in your family to get a
 30 divorce. When I got divorced the second time, my sister
 31 phoned me and said, "Joanie, what do you want?"
 32 (*Counts off items on her fingers.*) "You've got looks, brains,
 33 a good job. You play tennis and ski. You sing and play
 34 the piano. You've got it all! What in heaven's name do
 35 you want?"

(Pause) Her life is so tidy. Two kids, a loving husband, a dog, and a minivan. She just wouldn't understand. I guess what I want is to have someone love me just for me — not because I'm Joan, the high-powered attorney. But I keep bobbing in and out of relationships because it's dangerous being too close.

I guess I'm afraid that someone might find out that my bravado is a front. That I'm afraid. (Whispers.) Afraid. Do you understand that? I don't want to be rejected ... again. (She fights back the emotion and walks around the cross.) It takes courage to be real. To be vulnerable. He had that kind of courage. The courage to be weak. (Stops pacing.) And look! (Gestures to the cross and yells.) Look what happened to him! (Voice breaks.) They killed him.

(Rapidly and quieter) But before he died, he loved. And not for what he could get, but for what he could give. (Sighs.) And ultimately, what he gave was himself.

(Louder) That's what's so hard for me! I can't give myself! What I give is this plastic person that I've manufactured for protection!

(Pause) You know what just occurred to me? I complain about church people and their pious trappings ... but I'm no better. I have trappings, too. They're just a different kind.

(She looks out at the congregation.) Are you afraid, too? Why do we all need to defend ourselves? Why?

NARRATOR: (From Off-stage) Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said,

JESUS: (From Off-stage) You have said so (Matthew 27:11).

NARRATOR: (From Off-stage) But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor

1 wondered greatly (Matthew 27:12-14).

2 **JOAN:** *(Crying, looking at the cross)* I've messed up this life
3 that he's given me so badly. Could he love me now? Just
4 the way I am? *(She sits on one of the blocks, facing the cross.)*

5

6 **HYMN:** "Just as I Am" (verses 1, 2, and 3, sung by the CHOIR and
7 congregation.)

8

9 *(KENNETH enters, looks around the chancel area, and taps*
10 *JOAN on the shoulder.)*

11 **KENNETH:** Excuse me, can you tell me where the service is
12 being held? *(JOAN gestures toward the cross without*
13 *speaking.)*

14 **NARRATOR:** *(From Off-stage)* May I present Kenneth? Sixty-
15 four. Marine colonel, stockbroker, elder. Husband of
16 Marian. Father of Kenny.

17 **KENNETH:** Here? *(Looks around. Speaks to himself.)* It's not a
18 traditional service, then. *(Clears throat; shakes head in*
19 *disapproval.)* I wish they'd stop experimenting with
20 worship. Good Friday's *(Or Holy Week's, depending on when*
21 *the script is performed)* hard enough to understand ... even
22 for those of us who've been around the church all our
23 lives. I remember Marian trying to explain the concept of
24 the Crucifixion to young Kenny. I doubt if he ever did get
25 the point. I'm just sorry he didn't stick closer to the faith.
26 "Faith of Our Fathers" ... Humph! That boy didn't stick
27 close to anything I believed in. First one in the family to
28 vote Democrat. He didn't want much to do with church
29 after high school. I remember him mouthing off to me
30 about the church hypocrites. I should have put my foot
31 down right then.

32 That was years ago ... the Vietnam War was going full
33 tilt ... and we were in the middle of the building drive
34 around here. *(Looks around.)* Yes, I'm proud to say I had a
35 large part in building this sanctuary. We did some fancy

1 wheeling and dealing in those days. (*Chuckles.*) Put the
 2 squeeze on a few folks around here ...

3 I remember Benjamin Smith. Ben had enough money
 4 to buy and sell this town a couple times over. But he was
 5 stingy. (*Laughs.*) So a few of us got our heads together
 6 early in the campaign and laid out a strategy that old Ben
 7 couldn't resist.

8 We told him the committee had unanimously decided
 9 that he should chair the campaign ... That we'd do the
 10 work, but we needed him to be our "figurehead." Nothing
 11 works better than telling somebody they're needed. Well,
 12 he ate it up. We worked like dogs and he didn't lift a
 13 finger, except to write a very generous check. (*Reflective*)
 14 He said at the dedication ceremony that nobody had ever
 15 told him they needed him before. (*Shrugs.*) Who knows?
 16 Maybe we did need him.

17 And then there was Agatha Marlin. A spinster lady. Old
 18 and rich and smart. She clutched her purse through most
 19 of the campaign. Kept saying she was going to leave her
 20 money to our missionaries in India. India! Can you
 21 imagine? That's like these young upstarts on the Social
 22 Justice Committee wanting to go to bat for Haitian
 23 refugees ... and for AIDS patients in Africa! Charity
 24 begins at home, I say.

25 I finally got to Agatha. (*Turns and looks at window.*) See
 26 that? The J.O. Marlin window ... dedicated in memory of
 27 her late father, James Oscar Marlin. Yes indeed, charity
 28 begins at home. (*Squirms a little but doesn't seem to hear what*
 29 *he just said.*)

30 For some reason, I can't get Kenny off my mind today.
 31 He sent a card at Christmas ... from Massachusetts,
 32 Marian said. With a picture of his daughter. My
 33 granddaughter! (*Hangs his head.*) But I can't forgive him. I
 34 can't!

35 He was eighteen and two of his friends had already

1 been drafted for Vietnam, and I kept waiting for him to
 2 come home and tell me that he'd enlisted ... But when he
 3 came home he said he'd registered as a conscientious
 4 objector. In my family! A conscientious objector! I tried to
 5 reason with him, but he wasn't listening. Stubborn kid.

6 I even remember what I said to him: "Do you think I
 7 wanted to go to war, Kenny? Nobody wants to go to war.
 8 But somebody *has* to. It's your duty ... your duty to God
 9 and country."

10 And do you know what that boy said to me? He said,
 11 "Dad, it's my duty to object. Don't you see? I'm objecting
 12 *for* God and country! Didn't Jesus teach peace?"

13 And I said, "That's an oversimplification, Kenny, and
 14 you know it! I'm ashamed of you! You're no son of mine!
 15 Christ didn't back down when things got tough! Christ
 16 died for your sins, Kenny!"

17 And that boy looked me in the eye and said, "Our sins,
 18 Dad ... Ours." And he packed up his bags and left.

19 NARRATOR: (*From Off-stage*) After a little while the bystanders
 20 came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of
 21 them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to
 22 invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know
 23 the man." And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter
 24 remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the cock crows,
 25 you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept
 26 bitterly (Matthew 26:73-75).

27 KENNETH: Our sins ... Oh, God.

28 NARRATOR: (*From Off-stage*) By denying each other
 29 forgiveness, we deny him. By denying him, we deny
 30 ourselves.

31
 32 HYMN: "I Need Thee Every Hour"

33
 34 (*During the hymn, JOAN comes and leads KENNETH to a*
 35 *sitting block at the foot of the cross. BRAD enters. He looks*

1 *around and appears uncomfortable.)*

2 BRAD: He died for me? Man, he doesn't even know that I exist.

3 NARRATOR: *(From Off-stage)* This is Brad. Nineteen. Bright.

4 Underachiever. College freshman home for spring break.

5 BRAD: I tell you, the only reason I'm here is to humor my
6 mother. I seem to be doing that a lot since my dad died ...

7 I had trouble handling that. Still do.

8 It was just a year ago. Basketball season. Dad usually
9 came to my games when he could make it. And I had a big
10 game that day, but I wasn't sure he'd show, because we'd
11 had a big fight that morning. I'd partied big-time on the
12 weekend, and he chewed me out for that.

13 But then he came into the gym during the second
14 quarter, and I tried to pretend I hadn't seen him. I was
15 still ticked. But then Coach put me in and I was burnin'
16 up the court! It felt so good to show Dad how hot I was ...
17 but then there was some kind of a problem in the stands
18 and they stopped the game.

19 That's when I found out it was Dad. He collapsed right
20 there in the bleachers, and he died before they could get
21 him to the hospital. He was only forty-eight. And he was
22 never sick. I could never remember him being sick. I
23 never even got to talk to him. It was like ... like my whole
24 life changed. Like the bottom dropped out. *(Bitterly)* I
25 didn't see many signs of God around last year.

26 My mother took it pretty hard. There's just the two of
27 us now. I know she's lonely, but I couldn't stay and live in
28 that house with her. She was on my back all summer long.
29 Afraid to let me go anywhere.

30 And ... don't laugh ... I prayed. I really did. I prayed
31 that somehow, God would intervene and she'd
32 understand my side. And that she'd see that I needed a
33 life of my own. But God wasn't listening. I thought I was
34 doomed to living at home and going to community college
35 here. Then I got word that I'd received a basketball

1 scholarship to this small college.

2 Man, I tell you I split so fast I set a world record!
3 Couldn't wait to get out of that house! It was time for
4 Brad to take control of Brad's life ... And that's where I
5 am now. In control. It's my life, and I only tell my mother
6 what I want her to know ... if you know what I mean.

7 I've been home two days — two lousy days — and
8 already she's on my back about too much beer in the
9 refrigerator. "Your father wouldn't approve!" True.
10 (*Angrily*) But my father isn't here! She'd swallow her teeth
11 if she knew we had a three-kegger in the dorm every
12 weekend. And that I got so wasted last Saturday night
13 that I didn't see the sun until noon Monday!

14 And then she starts in on my grades. "You have to keep
15 a C average, Brad, or you lose the scholarship ... I didn't
16 see your grades from last semester." That's right, you
17 didn't. I didn't think you'd want to know that I'm on
18 academic probation. The basketball scholarship is
19 already down the tubes, Mama Mia.

20 And then she pries into my private life. "Have you met
21 any nice girls, Brad? Maybe if you had a girlfriend,
22 you wouldn't drink so much ... you wouldn't be so ... so
23 lonely ..."

24 I'm not *lonely*! (*Squats down, loses the toughness, voice*
25 *breaks.*) Sometimes I wonder if I had anything to do with
26 my dad's death. Maybe the fight we had that morning did
27 something to his blood pressure. I don't fight with my
28 mother. I just tune her out.

29 Sometimes I get so depressed that I think dying would
30 be easier than living. (*Sarcastically*) Cool, Brad. If you can't
31 control your life, maybe you can control your death. But
32 I don't have the guts for that. (*Looks at the cross.*) He didn't
33 control his death either, did he? (*Sighs.*) At night I just lie
34 in bed and stare at the ceiling and pray to a God who
35 doesn't answer.

1 **NARRATOR:** (*From Off-stage*) Now from the sixth hour there
 2 was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour
 3 Jesus cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why hast
 4 Thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:45-46). (*KENNETH leads*
 5 *BRAD over to sit on a block.*)

7 **HYMN:** “Amazing Grace” (verse 3 — **SOLOIST** from balcony or Off-
 8 stage, followed by verses 1 and 5 sung by the congregation and
 9 **CHOIR.**)

11 (*ANNE enters and stands behind the pulpit.*)

12 **NARRATOR:** (*From Off-stage*) This is Anne. Fifty-six. Sensitive
 13 pastor. Champion swimmer. Excellent public speaker.
 14 Mother of three adult children. Supports her invalid
 15 husband, a former college professor, now stricken with
 16 multiple sclerosis.

17 **ANNE:** They’ll be here soon, Lord. The handful who come to
 18 mourn. And I’m not ready. I just want to run away to the
 19 hills and forget committees and counseling and
 20 deadlines. It’s Friday ... and I’m still struggling with
 21 Sunday’s sermon. Oh Lord, you’d think that Easter
 22 would be the easiest of all.

23 Not so. For me, it’s one of the hardest There’s so
 24 much leading up to the Resurrection! And everything I
 25 write points me right back to the mirror. Right back to
 26 examining myself.

27 Day after day, people with problems ... serious,
 28 heart-breaking problems ... and I’m supposed to be able
 29 to help. Lord, some of them ... often the ones who need
 30 help the most ... I don’t even want to see! Oh God, I’m
 31 supposed to serve and love ... and so often I do both
 32 selectively, and sometimes for all the wrong reasons.
 33 You know, I’d rather have a crisis than this dreary, day-
 34 to-day plodding ... the cases where I know a problem
 35 has gone on for years and will continue to go on for

1 years ... like an abscess that won't heal.

2 (*Looks out into the congregation.*) And then there are the
3 people out there who think I'm God ... who refuse to let
4 me be human. And sometimes I buy right into that. I
5 stay with the folks who give me the strokes What
6 kind of a servant is that?

7 Other times I'll stick my neck out for an underdog or
8 take on an unpopular cause ... and then I have to look
9 at whether I'm doing it for you ... or for me.

10 You know, I led that memorial service last week for
11 Natalie Courtwright. She was only two years older than
12 I! After the service I got in my car and drove to the
13 mountains. Lord, I don't like facing my own mortality.
14 (*Long pause*) I'm afraid to die.

15 And I don't like facing my doubts. Maybe that's why
16 I'm not ready for Sunday. Easter Sunday. Sometimes I
17 question his life and death and resurrection ... even
18 when I'm saying the words. Oh, God! Help my unbelief!
19 (*BRAD comes and awkwardly tries to comfort her. He leads her*
20 *to sit at the cross with the others. All PLAYERS remain seated.*)

21 NARRATOR: (*From Off-stage*) And the people stood by,
22 watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved
23 others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his
24 Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up
25 and offering him vinegar, and saying, "If you are the King
26 of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription
27 over him, This is the king of the Jews (Luke 23:35-38).

28
29 HYMN: "Amazing Grace" (verses 2 and 4, sung by the congregation
30 and CHOIR)

31
32 NARRATOR: (*From Off-stage*) And they all meet under the
33 cross. And we meet here with them — each of them
34 mirrors of our own inadequacies and failures.
35 Relationships straining, struggling to survive our deadly



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