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A SERVICE of SHADOWS

LEE MAGNESS

This dramatic reading is anchored by quotations from the Passion narratives of the four Gospels. To this narrative have been added poetic lines that imagine the responses of the apostle Peter to those events. The reading is thus configured for two readers—a narrator (N) and Peter (P). Maundy Thursday, Good Friday or Easter Vigil services would be appropriate settings for the reading. The service of shadows (tenebrae in Latin) has been used throughout Christian liturgical practice to designate services of darkness on any of the last three days of Holy Week. Eight candles may be lit at the beginning of the service; they are then extinguished at the points indicated in the reading. Worship leaders are encouraged to intersperse songs (e.g., “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”) throughout the reading as appropriate.

Prologue

N It was a time for shadows.

Before the glorious light of resurrection morning,
there were dark nights, and even darker days.

On our way toward rejoicing in the resurrection,

we enter that shadow land, those days of darkness,
the darkness that stretched from the upper room to the arrest,
from trial to trial, from the mocking to the scourging,
from the cross to the tomb.

Dark days lie ahead of us too,
somber days, shadowed days.

We ask hard questions:

Will we notice the light, in the midst of so many shadows?

Would we notice the light, were it not for the shadows?

It is the time for shadows.

1 The Shadow of the Supper

N *When it was evening he sat at table with the twelve disciples.*

P I, Peter, in the upper room
I was seated in the last supper room

N *As they were eating, he said, One of you will betray me.*

P What a shock it was, we choked, we sputtered
Not on the fact but on the fear we uttered

N *And they were sorrowful and said, Is it I, Lord?*

P Can you sense the sorrow, share the shame
Mine and Judas' question, one and the same *(Extinguish candle one)*

2 The Shadow of the Garden

N *When they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

P Oh yes, I led the way, I went out
 Humming the hymn, of trust, of doubt

N *Jesus said, You will all fall away because of me this night.*

P Not I, not I, though they may, still
 I will never fall . . . I will never . . . I . . . will

N *Jesus said, This very night you will deny me three times.*

P Even if I die, I will not deny!
 . . . what a lie! *(Extinguish candle two)*

3 The Shadow of Sleep

N *Then Jesus went to the place called Gethsemane, taking with him Peter.*

P We got to go, to Gethsemane, me
 Peter, me (and the sons of Zebedee)

N *Jesus said to them, My soul is sorrowful, remain and watch with me.*

P What . . . watch . . . one . . . willing . . . weak?
 Jesus! We were . . . we . . . were . . . asleep

N *Jesus prayed, My Father, if this cannot pass, thy will be done.*

P Yes, we were with Jesus in his darkest moment
 Dead to the world, with the whole world in foment

N *While he was still speaking, Judas came with a crowd with clubs.*

P One last stand for the Lord in the garden
 One last straw, the sword, pardon, pardon *(Extinguish candle three)*

4 The Shadow of Justice

N *Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas, the high priest.*

P They fled, but I followed, I . . . at a distance
 I would have stayed too, but . . . for their insistence

N *And the high priest said, have you no answer? Jesus was silent.*

P I'm not his follower! What do you mean?
It's not my fault I was born a Galilean!

N *I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ.*

P By God, no! I ought . . . I ought to know
(You are the Christ, the son of the living . . .) No! *(Extinguish candle four)*

5 *The Shadow of the Cross*

N *As they marched out, they compelled a man to carry his cross.*

P O that those rough rails I had been blessed to bear
Alas, O Lord, I was not even there

N *And when they crucified him, they divided his garments among them.*

P I'd have stopped the grabbing, the gambling, the jeers
Alas, O Lord, I was not even near

N *And the chief priest mocked him saying, He saved others, he cannot save himself.*

P Amen, Amen, those blind eyes at least could see
That not living for himself, he would die for me *(Extinguish candle five)*

6 *The Shadow of the Shadow*

N *And Jesus cried, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

P My God, my God, why have I forsaken you?

And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

P Ripped curtain, cracked earth, torn tombs—these may be true
My broken, trembling heart, my rent soul—only these I knew

N *Then the centurion and those with him said, Truly this was the Son of God.*

P I'd said that long ago! Would that I had said it all along
What is there now to say? What now? He is gone *(Extinguish candle six)*

7 *The Shadow of the Tomb*

N *And Joseph of Arimathea took the body and wrapped it in a shroud.*

P It was an act of futility at least, at most a crime
 Where was I, who was I, that his crime was not mine?

N *And Nicodemus came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes.*

P I had once scorned that scared Pharisee, coming by night
 Was he more gracious to me, me fleeing by night?

N *And Joseph rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb.*

P Yes, shroud and stone sealed in the night
 But would there be shadow, were it not for the light? *(Extinguish candle seven)*

Epilogue

N It is a time for shadows.
 Before the glorious light of resurrection morning,
 there are dark nights, and even darker days.
On our way toward rejoicing in the resurrection,
 we have entered that shadow land, those days of darkness,
 the darkness that stretched from the upper room to the tomb.
Dark days lie ahead.
 somber days, shadowed days.
We have asked terrifying questions:
 Will we notice the light, in the midst of so many shadows?
 Would we notice the light, were it not for the shadows?
But we have ended with the triumphant question,
 Would there be shadows, were it not for the light?
It is a time for shadows.
 But it is also a time for hope. *(Extinguish candle eight)*

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