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The First Witness

John Steven Paul
Valparaiso University

Kari-Anne Blocher Innes
Valparaiso University

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The First Witnesses¹
a play for performance in the chancel based on John 4: 7-42
by Kari-Anne Blocher Innes and John Steven Paul
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

Characters:

FAITH, *a contemporary American woman*

MARTHA, *sister of Mary and Lazarus, from Bethany*

REBECCA, *the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at Jacob's well*

MARY, *the mother of Jesus*

LYDIA, *a dealer in purple cloth, converted to Jesus Christ by the Apostle Paul*

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The First Witnesses* is a dramatic exploration and celebration of the contributions of women to the historic task of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course, there were many other women from the Bible whom we might have memorialized in dramatic form, but these five seemed to us to have been exemplary witnesses who then went out and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Not all five actually met Jesus, but then the Savior might have said of Lydia and Faith, "blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed." This play is designed to be performed in the chancel area of a church as part of a worship service. The setting itself is a church, and directors and actors are encouraged to use as much of the sanctuary as possible. The women come out of various periods in history without regard for the rules of time and space. Perhaps, their entrances into the playing area and their use of the space should reflect their freedom from the ordinary dramatic convention.

It is Saturday evening; the day after Good Friday; the day before Easter Sunday. The action takes place in a dimly lit church sanctuary.

Easter is early this year; it is still the cold and damp month of March. A darkened church sanctuary. It is chilly inside and there is a bit of a draft.

FAITH, a woman of about 35, enters in a rush from the rear carrying an Easter lily in a foil-wrapped pot. She wears an overcoat. A large purse hangs over one of her shoulders. She is shivering from the March cold. She is weary; exhausted might be a better word. And, she is late.

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FAITH

Oh, no. I'm too late. They're gone. I knew it. Mary? Lydia? *(looks about)* Damn! *(to herself)* Faith! Not in church! *(She looks around, a bit frantically. Realizing that the weight of the plant is complicating her distress.)* Here. . . you *(to the plant)* sit here. *(She puts it down. Steps back; looks at its shape and sighs in disappointment. She goes to a door off the chancel, opens it, and calls through.)* Becky? *(She sits down heavily to rest for a moment on a short step ladder that has been left in the chancel by the altar guild ladies who had used it in their preparation of the chancel for Easter Sunday morning services.)*

I've missed them all. *(She begins to weep)* Oh, I didn't need this today. I didn't need to miss one more altar guild meeting. Now I'll have to hear all about it. *(mimicking)* "Faith, where were you? We missed you, dear. You have such lovely taste and you would have been so helpful with the lily arrangements. Two months in a row you've missed now. Maybe you should . . ." Maybe I *should* resign.

Martha? Is that you? No. *(She plops down again. Now cold, discouraged, and a little afraid.)* Oh, God, help me. Please help me.

ENTER MARTHA from up stage. She remains above FAITH, as if in the dark, through the opening lines.

Who's there? *(FAITH hardly bothers to look around)* Martha? Are you still here?

MARTHA

Why, I've just come. But what brings you here?

FAITH

You know, it's my altar guild night. But I'm late, as usual. Only tonight's the most important meeting of the year. Easter tomorrow. I've missed everyone. Again. And now I . . . *(She weeps.)*

MARTHA steps into the light and we see that she carries a basket covered by a linen cloth. She comes down and puts a comforting arm around FAITH.

Oh Martha, this has been an absolutely horrible day. I had to work this morning to make up for yesterday afternoon. And now I have nothing done at home. Nothing for dinner. No stuff for the kids' Easter baskets. The cleaners closed early and now I have to *iron* a white shirt for Peter to wear to church. I thought helping with the flower arrangements would cheer me up . . . I'm glad you're still here. I was actually feeling afraid. Isn't that-- *(She looks up at MARTHA)* Who are you? You're not Martha. I don't know you. *(She pulls away and looks at MARTHA more with strange curiosity than alarm. She notices the basket.)* What's in your basket?

MARTHA

Spices. And ointments. *(pause)* For preparation of the body.

FAITH

Whose . . . body?

MARTHA

My Lord's.

FAITH

Where is it?

MARTHA

Where we left it, I pray. In the tomb.

FAITH

(tentatively, inquiringly)

But . . . *(She's been taught to say this.)* He is risen.

MARTHA

What?

FAITH

(slowly)

He is risen . . . in . . . deed.

MARTHA

No.

FAITH

No. I guess not.

MARTHA

Come with me?

FAITH

Where?

MARTHA

To the tomb. In the morning.

FAITH

No. I'm afraid I have to help with the Easter breakfast.

MARTHA

I'm afraid too.

FAITH

What are you afraid of?

MARTHA

It is a dangerous time to be . . . to have been a friend of the Lord's. May I stay here?

FAITH

(preparing to leave)

Sure. I guess. For a while. There's a couch in the altar guild room.

MARTHA

Stay with me . . . Faith?

FAITH

No, I've got to be getting . . . Easter grass. How did you know my name?

MARTHA

I overheard you talking to yourself. Stay with me for a bit, Faith. I'm so afraid.

FAITH

Okay. For a little bit.

There is a knock at the door. It is the SAMARITAN WOMAN.

Oh. Who could that be? Here? Now? *(to MARTHA)* What time is it? *(MARTHA has never heard the word "watch" used for a way to keep time.)* I see you don't wear a watch either.

WOMAN

(from off)

Please . . . *(knocks)* . . . please let me in . . . *(knocks)* . . . please . . . *(knocks)* . . . I'm afraid . . . please. *(knocks)*

FAITH

Just a minute. Who are you?

WOMAN

Please let me in. I'm so afraid. Please.

(FAITH lets THE WOMAN in.)

MARTHA

Why are you here? What do you want?

WOMAN

Just tell me. Is it true? Is he dead?

FAITH

Is who dead?

(MARTHA looks at FAITH as if to say "Keep out of this!")

WOMAN

The Prophet.

MARTHA

Which prophet? There are many prophets.

WOMAN

The one who called himself "Messiah." Is he dead?

[pause]

MARY

(appearing at another entrance)

He was crucified.

[pause]

MARTHA

He died yesterday. Friday. They murdered him on the eve of the Sabbath. We laid him in a tomb. There wasn't even enough time to bury him properly.

MARY

We must go back. To finish. To--

WOMAN

So he was not the "Savior of the World."

MARY

Did you know him?

FAITH

Who are you all talking about?

MARTHA

Why did you let her in here? That's all we need now. Strangers. Maybe we could draw a little more attention to this place.

WOMAN

I met him. Once. At Jacob's well. At the foot of Mount Gerazim.

MARY

In Samaria? You're Samaritan, aren't you. (*THE WOMAN looks up at MARY, nods in resignation, and slowly turns to go.*) Wait, you can't leave now. It's dark out there. Dark and dangerous.

WOMAN

No. That's all right. I'll go. I found out what I needed to know. Thank you for letting me in for a moment.

MARY

Please. I'd like to hear about the day you met my son. It's important to know about each day. About each meeting.

The WOMAN looks at MARTHA for a sign that she may remain.

MARTHA

(Softening)

Tell us how you knew Jesus.

WOMAN

I didn't even know that was his name until now.

(She begins, reluctantly at first.) It was in Sychar. About a year ago. I came to draw water at the well. It was the heat of the day. Noon. There was a man sitting at the well. He looked weary, as if he'd been traveling on foot and sat down to rest. He turned to look at me and I could tell he was a Jew. I know well enough that Jews don't think Samaritans are worth the ground they walk on. I knew I'd better keep away until . . . well, you know the law, a man -- a Jew at that -- alone and a Samaritan . . . woman. I just didn't need the hassle. So, I put the jar on my shoulder and started to walk away. But then I heard a voice calling to me: "Give me a drink," he said. I can't

remember the number of times a man has asked that of me. Usually it's an order. But this voice -- I can still hear it -- stopped me. The sound of his voice came into me like a liquid and washed my entire body clean from the inside. I suddenly felt free to talk with him, openly, he seemed different somehow. I said "Sir, how is it that you, a Jew, call for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"

MARY

How did he answer?

WOMAN

I don't know what I expected to hear from him, but the conversation changed my life. "If only you knew what God gives," he said, "and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you life-giving water." Now, even after all that has changed, I can barely believe that it happened.

MARTHA

I can't believe he's dead.

[pause]

MARY

Did you give him a drink?

WOMAN

No. He wanted to give *me* water, "but," I said, "you don't have a bucket."

FAITH

(trying to participate in the conversation)

Good point.

WOMAN

I didn't know who I was talking to. I saw him as just another man reminding me again that while a Jew could give life to a Samaritan, a Samaritan was only good enough to serve a Jew.

MARTHA

He wasn't talking of drinking water, was he.

LYDIA

(who has quietly appeared at another entrance)

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

WOMAN

Who are you? How dare you repeat those words now?

FAITH

Lydia? Lydia . . . Phillips? But you look Oh, I get it, these are the new choir robes... Aren't they?

MARTHA

What are you doing here?

LYDIA

I'm here to prepare for our Lord.

FAITH

You mean to prepare the Lord's--

LYDIA

(cutting her off)

Yes. But first I'd like to hear--what is your name?

WOMAN

Rebecca . . .

LYDIA

. . . Rebecca's story. Please go on. I want to hear.

WOMAN

Oh, what's the use? Why am I telling you this? You can never understand.

FAITH

I'd just like to know if anybody got any water.

WOMAN

For the first time in my life, I thought, I'm the equal of a man! He needed me as much as I needed him. A man and a woman both in need of the same water from the same well. He was as weary and thirsty as I.

MARY

He didn't argue with you did he. He was not an arguer.

WOMAN

No.

LYDIA

There was nothing to argue. Jesus knew that in the eyes of God there is no difference between men and women.

WOMAN

Then I challenged him: "You don't claim to be greater than Jacob, do you?" I asked.

MARTHA

You challenged Jesus?

WOMAN

Yes. But he answered me with love. He wanted me to understand. He respected me. He kept on talking about water. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring gushing up to eternal life." This man wanted to give me this water . . . as a friend . . . a brother . . . a savior, not as the enemy. Just to test him I said, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

FAITH

So then he gave you the water.

WOMAN

(ashamed)

He said. "Go call your husband . . . and come back." He knew I didn't have a husband.

FAITH

Well, did you have a husband or didn't you?

WOMAN

I'd *had* a few "husbands." I wasn't married at the time. The point is, he knew all about me and my sins, but he still wanted to give me the living water.

FAITH

He was God. God knows everything. I guess.

WOMAN

He looked at me as if he could see into my soul. And it was at that moment that I really looked at him for the first time and I spoke up with the faith of a child, "I know that some day, the Messiah will come and tell us the Truth about all things."

MARTHA

He was the Messiah: the one who was speaking to you.

LYDIA

He *is* the Messiah.

WOMAN

Then he said the most amazing thing a Jew could have said: that it didn't matter whether we worship in the temple in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerazim in Samaria. God is a spirit, he said--

LYDIA

--and true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth.

WOMAN

(angrily)

Would you stop repeating his words.

LYDIA

But they've all come true. When I first came to Phillipi I met some women who were traveling merchants dealing in cloth and perfume. We wanted to worship the God of Abraham together, but there weren't enough Jewish men to form a synagogue. What could we do? We wanted to pray together, but there was no temple. So we went outside the city walls to the bank of the Gangites River and worshipped at the water's edge. And, now the people of God worship in the streets of Phillipi, in the plaza of Antioch, in an eating room in Corinth, in the groves of Ephesus, in the fields of Galatia, in the catacombs of Rome--

FAITH

I know a church that holds services in the YMCA.

MARTHA

What do you mean "now"? Who *are* you?

MARY

Where did you say you were from?

LYDIA

My name is Lydia. I'm a cloth merchant. Purple goods are my specialty. I was born in Thyatira, but I live in Phillipi.

FAITH

Phillipi? I thought you were from—

LYDIA

It's a Roman colony.²

² Cf. The conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:14-15

MARTHA

Why have you come here?

LYDIA

I met a preacher in Phillipi named Paul, a tent-maker by trade. He worshipped the God of Abraham, but he proclaimed a new prophet, the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus Christ, had come and freed us from the Law of Moses.

FAITH

Do you mean Saint Paul? He lived after the resurrection, didn't he?

MARTHA

The resurrection?

LYDIA

Yes. But Paul told us about the day they crucified Jesus and he quoted the psalm that says "You will not allow your devoted servant to rot in the grave." So that's why I'm here today: to go to the tomb and to care for Jesus's body.

WOMAN

So he is dead. Even you know it.

LYDIA

I know that he died, but-- (*She is momentarily shaken*)

MARY has quietly withdrawn from the conversation and gone, unnoticed, to MARTHA'S basket, taking from it a rather exotic-looking bottle.

MARY

(Interrupting LYDIA)

Martha, may I have some of this perfume? It's myrrh, isn't it? I know it's wasteful. Daubing such expensive stuff on this old thing. Thirty years and I've never washed it. There's hardly a scent of myrrh any more. My cousin Elizabeth gave it to me on the day I told her about the baby . . . and the angel.

FAITH

(realizing now who this is)

Mary, the mother of . . .

LYDIA

My soul magnifies the Lord?

MARY and LYDIA

And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.³

(They embrace.)

MARY

But NOT on that road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Oh, I needed to rest. Riding, riding. Then a barn, a barn to stop and lie down. I sank into the straw just as my pains started. After he was born I fell into the deepest sleep of my life. It was light when I awoke. I opened my eyes and beside me lay my son, wrapped in this yellow shawl.

FAITH

Jesus's mother. I *must* be dreaming.

MARY

There were many visitors, most of them humble. But several days after the baby was born, three kings came to the stable. Kings! And they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. That myrrh has finally begun to fade from this shawl now. May I refresh it with some of yours?

MARTHA

Of course, use as much as you like.

LYDIA

Take a piece of my purple cloth, too. Purple is the color of kings. Make of it a new shawl to remember Christ the king.

³ LYDIA seeks to confirm MARY's identity by repeating the first words of MARY's song in Luke 1:46-47 almost like a password. When LYDIA receives the password phrase from MARY, LYDIA knows that this is, indeed, the mother of Jesus.

MARY

A king? No, he was only Jesus, my son. Let me remember him that way.

LYDIA

As you wish. *(to the WOMAN indicating the water pitcher)* May I have a drink? I'd like to read something to all of you. It's very important to me. *(takes out a letter, opens it, and reads)*. "May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again, rejoice!" This is a letter from Paul. He believed your son Jesus was Christ the King. He drank of the living water.

WOMAN

(Giving a cup of water to LYDIA)

But Jesus is dead, right?

LYDIA

Let's go to the tomb and see.

MARTHA

At first light, we are going to prepare his body for burial. It's our final act of friendship and love. Will you come with us?

WOMAN

No. I'm sure you'll manage just fine. I'm going to try to forget I ever met the man.

LYDIA

(To MARTHA)

Paul proclaimed that on the third day the Messiah rose from the dead.

MARTHA

Rose from the dead? Like Lazarus?

LYDIA

Yes.

MARTHA

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. I saw him do it. But now that Jesus himself is dead, what hope do we have?

FAITH

Did you believe Sai – uh, this Paul?

LYDIA

Yes. With all my heart. And, I ran back to Thyatira and spoke to all our household, the slaves, other freed persons, and the mistress herself about Christ.

WOMAN

You sound like me. I got up from Jacob's well in a daze and went back into Sychar. I even left my water jug behind. I started telling people. Everyone I met. I told them to go out and meet the prophet that called himself "Messiah."

FAITH

You were witnesses.

LYDIA

Day after day we would sit at the table and break bread and I would speak the Good News that "everyone who believes in Jesus is set free."

WOMAN

But how can a dead man set you free? Free to work. Free to toil. Free to wait on men.

FAITH

To serve on the altar guild, to cook the Easter breakfast, to do soup kitchen duty.

LYDIA

The entire household believed and we were baptized together as one body.

MARTHA

How can you believe what you haven't seen?

LYDIA

Paul said, “It is through faith that all of us are in union with Christ Jesus. We were baptized into union with Christ and now we are clothed with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between slave and free, between men and women: we are all in union with Christ Jesus”

WOMAN

Whoever this Paul is, he’s right about one thing. There *is* no difference . . . we are all slaves again. I am again the abandoned, husband-less woman at the well . . . waiting to serve Is this “saving the world”?

FAITH

(She is downgrading these roles)

I pick up after the kids. I try to keep the house straight. I listen to customer complaints at Sears.

MARY

You’re a mother to your children.

LYDIA

You’re a wife for your husband.

MARTHA

You’re a servant in your community.

WOMAN

You’re a fool. Just like me.

LYDIA

Mary, would you read Paul’s letter to us?

MARY

(reading from the letter)

So then, my brothers, how dear you are to me and how I miss you! How happy and proud I am of you! --this, dear brothers, is how you should stand in your life in the Lord.

WOMAN

Brothers? I thought you said this was a letter to you.

FAITH

I can see how women *stand* in your church.

LYDIA

No, that's just it. Paul included all of us in the brotherhood, men and women, just like Jesus did. Go on, Mary.

MARY

(continues reading)

. . . please I beg you, try to agree in your life in the Lord. And you too, my partner, I want you to help these women; for they have worked hard for me to spread the gospel May you always feel joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again: rejoice!

WOMAN

(exploding)

Your union with the Lord? Rejoice? The Lord is dead. You're in union with a dead man. A dead man you never met. How could you know him? How can he save you? What made you believe?

LYDIA

You.

WOMAN.

What? Don't mock me, woman.

LYDIA

It was you, Rebecca. I see it now. Your story is the living water. And through the living water we will receive all that God has promised. *(Takes some of the water from the pitcher and anoints herself. She then takes some more water and turns to anoint MARY.)*

MARY

Thank you for this cloth. Fit for kings you say. Imagine me, a carpenter's wife, wearing the purple of kings.

LYDIA

(Anointing MARY) Blessed be the mother of Christ.

MARY

Rather, "happy are those who hear the word of God and obey it." *(She turns and anoints MARTHA.)*

MARTHA

Shall we go now to the tomb? *(Turns to anoint FAITH)* Will you come with us, Faith?

FAITH

Lydia, why do we have to go to the tomb if Christ is risen?

MARTHA

We go to prepare--

FAITH

--yes, you've said, the body *(back to LYDIA)* But there won't be a body there, will there?

LYDIA

We go to prepare to be sent. To be sent into the world as witnesses.

MARY

Faith, we need you to go with us.

LYDIA

Please.

FAITH

(really struggling now)

I'd like to go. Very much. But there'll be hundreds of people at the Easter breakfast. This is a big church, you know. This is where I belong.

MARTHA

Faith, once Jesus said to me *You are so worried and troubled about so many things, but just one thing is needed. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus is set free. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her.* Come with us to the tomb.

FAITH

OK. I'll go. But now I'm really afraid.

LYDIA

I know. I am too.

FAITH accepts MARTHA'S anointing.

FAITH

I see it now too, Rebecca. *(She goes to baptize the Samaritan WOMAN)* You are his witness. Thanks for telling me your story. I needed to hear it again. Will you come with us?

WOMAN

(Turning away.) I can't.

MARY and MARTHA exit out through the congregation. LYDIA looks at FAITH, indicating that they have done all they can do for THE WOMAN, and exits. FAITH follows a moment later. THE WOMAN turns upstage and remains on stage alone. There is a pause during which a song is sung by the actors or by the congregation led by the actors. "Come to the Water"⁴ works well. After the song is finished the WOMAN turns back and says . . .

⁴ "Come to the Water" by John Foley, SJ.

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WOMAN

Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

FAITH

(who has re-entered. From the back)

Rebecca. He *is* risen!

The WOMAN lifts up her head .

END