The Discovery of the Cross of Christ by St. Helen

A play for September 14th, the Exaltation of the Cross

Cast:

Secretary Ignatius(male or female)

St. Helen

Bishop Marcarius

Widow Viacrucis

Announcer

Additional servants if desired

(St. Helen is sewing, seated in a chair)

Secretary, running into the room with a plant in hand: Your Majesty! Your Majesty!

Helen: Speak, Ignatius. What are you holding out to me?

Secretary: It’s basil, my lady. An herb used in…

Helen: Yes. Yes, I know what basil is and what it’s for, but why are you giving it to me?

Secretary: The bishop, your highness, is here to explain.

Helen (standing to her feet): Oh! Bishop Marcarius! Has he found something? Do send him in!

Bishop: My lady.

Helen: Bishop Marcarius! Do you have something to report? What have you found?

Bishop: My lady, if you will permit me, I will tell you the whole story.

(Helen waves him to a chair and hovers near by.)

Bishop: As you know, my lady, the pagan rulers of former centuries caused temples to their false gods to be erected over the holy places of this land.

Helen: Such desecration!

Secretary, punctuating his words with the sprig of basil: Over the cave in Bethlehem, a temple to one, over Calvary another, and over the Holy Sepulchre, a third!

Helen: He speaks the truth.

Bishop: As I was saying, these temples were disrespectful to say the least…

Helen: Yes, I know. Which is why I had them torn down and the rubble thrown into the sea. Please tell me what has happened.

Bishop: Workmen have been busy at each site…

Helen: Yes, I KNOW. I sent them there to unearth whatever they may find and in particular at the site of Calvary. It is the site shown me in my dream! What have they found?!

Bishop: My lady, this day, workmen came to the site and removed the last of the pagan temple ruins and what do you think?

Helen: I think you are trying my patience, Bishop!

Bishop: Basil!

Helen: Basil.

Bishop: Yes, my Lady. A great patch of basil, and how sweet it smelled. It put me in mind of a large tomato sandwich I had for… Yes. Ahem. Well, as you instructed, the workmen opened the ground under the temple, and they began just where the patch of basil was thickest.

Helen, leaning forward: “Yes? And?”

Bishop: For three cubits of depth, only dust, My Lady.

Helen, disappointed: Oh.

Bishop: And then!

Helen, excited, holding the Bishop’s arm: And then? And then what?

Bishop: THREE crosses, your highness. Three crosses and a board bearing an inscription you would recognize!

Helen: It is found! The holy Cross on which our savior died! It’s found! It’s found! (she dances with the secretary, still holding onto the sprig of basil) Which one belongs to Our Lord and which belong to the two thieves? Is not Our Lord’s cross in the middle?

Bishop: And now we come to the problem, Madam, for we cannot determine which is which. The inscription board was some distance from the crosses, and they were arranged in a circle. Which is which?

Helen: Oh! Surely we must be able to determine which is which! Surely!

Bishop, getting to his feet: I leave you with this conundrum, My Lady. Think on it. Pray on it. I must get to Widow Viacrucis before nightfall. She is quite ill, and I think will not last much longer. Her late husband was a great servant of your son, the Emperor.

Helen: I will send her some soup. (snatching the basil from the secretary) With basil. And I will think on this… Bishop!

Bishop, turning back: Yes, My Lady?

Helen: Oh, Bishop! Why did I not think of this before?

Bishop: I do not know, My Lady.

Helen: Let us visit the good Widow together…

Bishop: She is quite ill, Madam, I do not think company would…

Helen: And let us bring with us the three crosses! Would not the cross of Our Lord, which healed the world of sin also heal the sickness of our friend Widow Viacrucis? Would it not?

Bishop, smiling: The very thing!

Later:

Bishop, praying over an unconscious lady: And may the blessings of our God, Father (here he touches her hand to one piece of wood – nothing happens), Son (touches her hand to another piece of wood – nothing happens), and Holy Spirit (touches her hand to a third piece), come down upon you and… and… and…

Widow: Bishop! What do you here? Ought not you to have announced yourself before coming to see me?

Helen, stepping from the shadows, overjoyed: Dear lady! Look what God has done! The True Cross! It is the True Cross of Our Lord. No! (to the secretary) No one touch it save the Bishop. But let us bow before it and reverence it. So many have wished to look upon what we now behold! (she is silent for a long moment, then turning to the secretary) Let the beacons be lit!

Widow: What beacons My Lady?

Helen: The bonfires, dear Widow! Those who await us in Constantinople wish to hear of this discovery the moment it is made, and you, my dear, have helped us discover it! Now fires will be lit along the mountain ridges from Jerusalem to Constantinople, and they will know the greatest treasure in Christendom has been found!

Bishop: It is a day of great feasting, to be sure, but let us fast as well, for is it not to pay for OUR sins that he made such a sacrifice upon this wood? Indeed. Indeed (he contemplates the wood).

Announcer: And so the bonfires were lit, and the basil adorns our churches every September 14th, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. The only day of the year that is a feast and a fast day at the same time.

(Everyone picks up a cross and shoulders it)

And on this day, Christians in every time and place remember to take up our crosses and follow Christ Jesus in giving our lives for others.