

The Easter Verses of the Three Marys

A medieval short play for Eastertide

This short drama is one of the oldest and most important pieces of drama in Europe. The written version dates from the 12th Century and is recorded in a manuscript kept at Vic in Spain. The drama is an enhanced version of the encounter between Mary and the Angel at the tomb on Easter morning recorded in the gospels. This play has been performed at Eastertide for centuries and is still has great power today.



By tradition, the three Marys who buy ointment and go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobe (the mother of James) and Mary Salome. In this version, I imagine Mary Jacobe as the motherly, practical type; Mary Salome as younger, elegant, wanting the best; and Mary Magdalene as overwhelmed by grief and finding it almost impossible to go to the tomb but impelled to do so. In Spanish versions of the drama, Mary Magdalene carries a jar of expensive ointment, Mary Jacobe carries a broom, and Mary Salome carried an incense burner (small thurible). The merchant is an East End barrowboy, probably minding the stall while his master is away, wheeling and dealing to get a good price but also sensitive to the women's grief. The angel is strong, straightforward, unshowy, his declaration that Christ is risen convinces and draws us in.

The repeated refrain 'How great is our grief' needs to be carefully handled so it doesn't become melodramatic. It needs to be heartfelt and spoken differently each time it occurs. Otherwise it could simply become comic and spoil the atmosphere of the piece.

This adaptation simplifies some of the language and occasionally adds phrases to make the meaning clearer for children. It could be performed as a short play, with rudimentary costumes and props. Or it could simply be read as a scripted dialogue, perhaps with images projected in the background. The language deliberately mimics the Latin tropes of the original text to convey the timeless quality of the story – one of the great narratives of the Christian tradition.

Running time is around 4 minutes.

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Dramatis personae

Mary Jacobe
Mary Salome
Mary Magdalene
Young Merchant
Angel

*Mary Jacobe speaks her opening lines to the audience simply and directly.
Then the dialogue between the women commences.*

Mary Jacobe	Jesus is dead and laid in the tomb.
Mary Salome	Let us go to buy myrrh and rich spices so that we can do honour to his body.
Mary Magdalene	Let us anoint him with pure and scented oils.
Mary Jacobe	Almighty Father, highest one, Gentle King of the angels, What shall we mourning women do? How great is our grief.
Mary Magdalene	We have lost our comfort and our Lord: Jesus Christ, the son of Mary. He was our support and our dear. How great is our grief.
Mary Salome	But let us go to buy the ointment with which we may anoint his body. How great is our grief.

*The three Marys walk across to the merchant. They inspect the different jars
and pots of ointment he is selling. It is clear they are looking for something
special (myrrh) and when they find it they speak:*

Mary Jacobe	Tell us, young merchant, Will you sell us this ointment, rich and rare?
Mary Salome	Tell us the price, for you shall have it now.
Mary Magdalene	How great is our grief.
Merchant:	Women of grief, mark my words: if this is the ointment you want to buy,

you will discover it is endowed with the powers of myrrh.

If you use this expensive ointment to anoint a body,
the body will not decay,
the worms will not be able to consume it.
Your Jesus will remain as the day he died.

If this ointment is what you want so very much,
you must pay one talent of gold.
Otherwise you will never take it with you,
or know its mysterious powers.

Mary Jacobe Merchant, give us the ointment, please.

Mary Magdalene Look, here is the money you ask,
we are handing it to you now,

Mary Salome takes out her purse and finds one gold talent, a huge amount of money, and hands it over cautiously to the young merchant.

for we shall go to anoint Christ's wounds.
How great is our grief!

Mary Salome Sisters, Jesus was our great joy,
but now that joy is shed
like blossoms from the apple tree.

Mary Magdalene The innocent one has endured scorn
and the gibbet of the cross,
because of hate and envy,
the dark deeds of his own people,
the ones he loved.

Mary Jacobe Sisters, it is right to mourn:
We mourn as we look for Christ.
We mourn as we remember the terrible things that were done.
We will mourn as we anoint his body.

Mary Magdalene Let us go to see the sepulchre.

As the Marys advance towards the tomb, the angel appears and bars their way. He is dressed in dazzling white.

Angel Mary Magdalene,
Mary Jacobe,
Mary Salome,
hail!

Each Mary in turn is surprised the angel knows her name.

You weep because you seek Jesus in the tomb.
You weep as you come to anoint his wounds
with your precious ointments.

But he is risen!
Turn your tears into shouts of joy!
From death the Prince of Life is risen.
This I make know to you! Rejoice!

Mary Magdalene simply doesn't believe the angel or has not heard what he has said. She wearily continues her journey to the tomb. This time, the angel lets them pass. They find no body, only the burial cloths. They look around frantically, disconsolately.

Mary Magdalene Where is Christ my Lord,
the son of God on high?

Angel Whom are you looking for in this tomb, friends of Christ?

Mary Jacobe *[losing patience]* The crucified Jesus of Nazareth, friend of heaven.

Angel He is not here.
He is risen as he foretold.
Go to his disciples.
Go into the holy city.
Go out to the whole world
and to all the peoples.
Proclaim that he has risen saying . . .

Mary Salome Alleluia!

Mary Jacobe Alleluia!

Mary Magdalene *[quietly and reflectively as if the message had not yet sunk in]* Alleluia!

Mary Salome The angel sitting at the tomb proclaims that Christ is risen!

Mary Magdalene *[with confidence and joy]* He is risen indeed!

Three Marys together: Alleluia!