Good Friday
West Henrietta - 1961
Rolling Meadows - 1963

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 23: 47 Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man.

St. Matthew 27: 54 Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God!

THE CENTURION

Tradition has it that my name is Longinus. I was a Roman centurion, captain of a century, commander of a hundred rough and rugged soldiers! Like you of the 20th Century I built my whole life around myself - my own wants - my own ambitions - my own dreams and desires. Like you, I counted up everything in terms of man's strength, man's wisdom, man's mind, and man's will. Like so many of you, I took everything I could get and cared not who got hurt - so long as it wasn't ~~me~~ I. I say I was like you - because you are a generation which insists on living without God. You are a generation which insists on making bombs a blessing and a boast, and empty space more precious than people and the blessing of God. I thought I could get along perfectly well without God until one Friday afternoon - it was truly a "Good" Friday for me. It was then that God came crashing down into my life with all of His dynamic love and divine mercy - and I found my Savior and salvation. Let me tell you about it.

It seems like only yesterday that a command was given me, Centurion, crucify these men! The morning had dawned like any other day in spring. It was to be a great and exciting day. Hundreds of thousands of Jews had come from all parts of the world to celebrate their annual Passover Festival. Special soldiers had been detailed to help keep order in the city. We had heard that during the night a strange trial had been held by the Jewish court and that Pilate would be compelled to pass the sentence of death on an innocent man or face revolt. The rumor was true. It was simple to predict Pilate's course of action. Under pressure a weak character will be selfish and unfair. Pilate was weak. He was outrageously unjust. Although he insisted to the very end that the Man was innocent, he finally gave permission to crucify Him. But what did I care!

Oh, I had heard about Him before - The Prophet of Nazareth, He was called. For the past three years He had been traveling throughout Palestine, and all sorts

of unusual things were rumored about Him. It was said that He had healed the sick, made the lame walk, given sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. It was even said that He had raised the dead. A man in my position, however, was not supposed to be a religious man. When my companions and I spoke about Him we did it jokingly. We thought of Him as some sort of a magician. I'll never forget how we laughed when we heard that He claimed to be the Son of God with the power to forgive sins. How rediculous could any man be, I thought.

Centurion, crucify these men! The command was not unusual. Ghastly scenes and brutal assignments were part of my business. I was a true soldier. By repeated contact with the inhuman my heart had become hard, and I was not easily touched by fear or pity. What I did not know was that God can go right through the calluses on a man's heart and touch it where it will respond. That day I was to learn that God can in a moment frighten the boldest and most defiant of men and let them know that He is God and that they are only men.

Centurion, crucify these men! It was about eight o'clock in the morning when I received the command. We were ready with our implements of torture. From the beginning it was evident that this crucifixion would be different from any of the others I had performed. It was the innocent One who made the difference. Others about to die had usually be defiant or cowardly; He was calm and confident. Others had been vindictive and revengeful; He was kind and forgiving. How grateful He was when we relieved His beaten body of the heavy cross! Love seemed to stream forth from all over Him. When He should have been thinking about Himself, He was thinking about others. With compassion and sorrow He turned to the sobbing women that were following Him and said, Daughters of Jerusalem weep not for Me; and then He warned them of the impending doom of their city. He was calm and submissive when we nailed Him to the Cross! I'll never forget it -- His exhausted body stretched over the rough wood lying on the ground - the open palms that had so ofter blessed, but had never hurt - the sharp iron spikes - the lifted mallet! Suddenly I became sick to my stomach. A true picture of a crucifixion would make all of you

shudder, and some of you faint. I can still hear the haunting sound of the hammer blows as my men drove the nails through His hands and feet.

Others, as they were being crucified, had often rent the air around Calvary with their shrieks of pain and their screaming to heaven for vengeance on their tormentors, or had make it blue with their dreadful oaths and curses; but He was silent. When finally He did speak - in a moment of agonizing pain - it was to pray calmly; not for Himself, but for us, His heartless murderers: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. That tore to shreds my soldierly indifference Have you ever come upon someone who was praying for you while you were doing him a wrong? Can you appreciate how I felt? The Man I was killing was praying for me! Here was something not human; it was divine!

I looked around. The behavior of the mob was shocking. It was devilish and satanic! Most disgusting of all was the conduct of the priests and Pharisees. They had come, not to console the Dying, but to taunt Him. They forgot entirely the dignity of their office, and celebrated their victory with fiendish delight. One could hardly blame the others for joining them in their devilry. The false accusation voiced before Caiaphas was taken up as the theme of their spite: Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save Thyself! His claim the divinity became the basis of their mockery: If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross! He saved others; Himself He cannot save! Throughout, Christ remained silent.

Then God spoke! The Pharisees and Sadducees had often asked for a sign from heaven. Now they got one! As noon approached, the bright sun was looking down on the scene of horror. There was not a cloud in the sky. Then it happened! The sun began to hide its face. It became frightfully and fearfully dark. For three hours men had been ridiculing the Son of God; for three hours God answered with silent darkness. I remembered having heard that there had been a bright light and angel song over the fields of Bethlehem on the night when Christ was born. There was darkness and an awful stillness over the fields of Jerusalem on the day

when Christ was killed. The mockery ceased. Men moved slowly and spoke in whispers. It had been a terrible place for Him; now it was terrible for us. Then, suddenly He called into the darkness, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? He asked for a drink and received it. He called out a word of triumph and victory, It is finished! Then He died, like a child falling asleep in the arms of its father, saying confidently: Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit.

There were more signs from heaven. The earth shuddered and shook! The rocks burst! Gaves opened! Saints arose! God showed us now that He is God and that we were only men - sinful, little men. Frightened and deeply moved, the people began to leave Calvary, beating their breasts and wringing their hands.

I could keep silent no longer. I had to speak. As I pounded my breast with regret, the words came to my mouth: Certainly this was a righteous man! Truly this was the Son of God! I had never studied theology. Yet it was all so clear to me, and so convincing. He was the Son of God. He Himself had said it, and righteous man that He was, He could not have lied.

Certainly this was a righteous man. Truly this was the Son of God! Later I discovered that my confession was not new. To His mother the angel had announced before His conception: Thou shalt conceive...and bring forth a Son...He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest. At His Baptism a voice from heaven had said: This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. To His question, Whom say ye that I am? Peter had responded, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Very often when God cannot get through to your heart through your ears, He will get at your heart through your eyes. That is the way God got through to me. That is why He sends earthquakes, and floods, and sickness, and destruction. That is why your church has stripped its altar of its sacred vessels tonight, and put a veil over the crucifix. You must learn to gasp at your sins and your godless ways. You must know that by your sins you have crucified Christ, as surely as we did. You must see your need for God and for His only Son who came into this dark world

to redeem you. WITHOUT GOD your life is futile. WITHOUT GOD there is no law and order, there is no love, no peace, no guidance in the world. ONLY GOD can bring order into your life and peace into your souls. He does this through His Son. God was in Christ on the first Good Friday reconciling the world unto Himself - taking upon Himself our sin, our shame. Say it to yourself again: WITHOUT GOD you are like a fish out of water, like a bird without wings, like a drop of water blown into a blast furnace, like a blade of grass stuck into the sand, like a plane that has lost its motor, and a rocket that has lost its power!

Certainly this was a righteous man! Truly this was the Son of God! I returned to Jerusalem that evening far different from what I had been when I had left the city that morning. I could never forget what I had seen and heard. I wanted to know more about Christ. I learned the most glorious truth of all. He is my Savior. I helped to kill him; but He died for me. He died for you too! Believe that! Confess that! And see what it does for you!

Amen.