

EARTHSIDE

Two poignant moments of the Passion narrative are used as the basis for a script that asks how Jesus' humanity impacted the Easter story, why the appearances of angels in the moments surrounding Jesus' birth and death are so different.

Bible References: Luke 22:43-44;
Matthew 28:1-7

Cast: Azrael ('helper of God'), Raph(ael) ('God has healed'), The One and Only (Jesus), The Boss (God – voiceover only), Mary Magdalene (non-speaking), Choir (three or more other angels)

Props: small stones, a rucksack, wings, audio of the sound of an earthquake, a sign for the Triangle Office, white clothes for all the angels (or a white top and jeans)

Performance notes: In the script, God's angels are given the task of preparing diligently for the coming victory of Jesus. Most assume they need to practise their singing for some big celebration, like when Jesus arrived on earth ('earthside'). But one angel interprets God's instructions differently, preparing in a more hands-on, or human, way, and despite his friend's best efforts to dissuade him, he is chosen for God's special resurrection mission.

'Earthside' and 'heavenside' are used throughout this to represent the heavens and earth – two sides (one tangible, one intangible) of the same reality.

Azrael is thoughtful, dependable, caring and overwhelmingly practical. Raphael is the means by which Azrael's thoughts are explained to the audience.

The person voicing God should be out of sight, using a microphone, and if possible, their voice should be deepened using a sound filter.

Several features are speculative and may potentially be seen by some as irreverent – eg, the idea that The Boss has a sense of humour, or that angels are able to question and consider things. These aspects have been added to assist the narrative rather than make particular theological points.

Ultimately the aim of the piece is to present the audience with moments of high emotion in the passion of Jesus.

Earthside

Written by Matt Little

Scene 1: Heavenside, outside the Press Room

(A group of angels exit the Press Room, most (Choir and Raphael) are doing vocal warm ups. Azrael, however, is frowning and looking overly thoughtful. Raphael notices and walks over.)

Raph Hey, Azrael, what's up?

Azrael Huh? Oh, nothing, Raphael.

Raph Nothing? It's just that since Gabriel started the briefing, you've seemed... well, distinctly down-winged. The rest of us are really excited!

Azrael No, no – I'm not down-winged at all, Raph, just thinking about how I'm going to prepare for this 'Resurrection Mission'.

Raph What's there to think about? The One and Only is coming to the climax of his earthside mission. He'll be put to death, buried, mourned – everyone earthside will think he's failed his mission... And then the ultimate plot twist – when all is shot to darkness – the Son will rise!

- Azrael** I know, it's truly brilliant, but Gabriel's exact words were *(puts on a voice)* 'The Boss wants you to prepare for this Resurrection Mission like it's the most important moment so far in the whole of history! He'll be looking for those preparing most diligently to take part in a special task.'
- Raph** Right! And don't you think it's obvious what that special task will be?
- Azrael** *(Looks at Raph as though it's not obvious at all)* Erm... No.
- Raph** Come on, Az. Think about it. When the One and Only took on flesh and went earthside to live among them, there were huge choirs of us lot singing full throttle. It was full-on party mode! So when Jesus completes his mission, don't you think the party will be even bigger? I guarantee you that God wants us to prepare our vocal chords! He wants us to be both pitch perfect and word perfect! Our announcement of the One and Only's victory will be recorded for all of history!
- Azrael** You see... I just think that sounds a bit... obvious. Jesus has always been a lot harder to second guess than that. And he's made some close friends earthside. I think he'll be looking for something a bit more intimate than a huge celebration.
- Raph** So what do you think God needs us angels for?
- Azrael** *(Shrugs)* Pfff... Who knows? But I reckon the One and Only needs someone keeping an eye out for him. He's always had his Dad by his side, at his back, in his heart. But he's going to die, Raph! I know it's only temporary, but death and the living God just don't mix – the One and Only will be all by himself. I think he'll need a bit of help.
- Raph** Oh, come on, Azrael, this is the Messiah we're talking about here. The Ultimate Warrior. The One and Only! He's been preparing for this moment his whole life. He'll be fine. All we need to do is be ready to jump earthside the moment the resurrection is complete, and make sure we know the harmonies and lyrics to the party songs by heart.
- Azrael** If you think so. See you later.

Scene 2: Earthside, on the Mount of Olives

(Azrael is trying to move small pebbles but struggling either to pick them up or move them very far. Raphael appears and watches him at a distance, bemused.)

Raph Why are you playing with rocks?

Azrael I'm not, I'm practising moving them so eventually I'll be able to roll the tombstone away.

Raph *(Frowning)* Why? The One and Only will do that.

Azrael But he'll be wrapped in cloths and potentially still weak from, like, you know, having recently been dead and all.

Raph *(Shrugs his shoulders and waves a hand in dismissal)* You do know we angels, being heavenside, can have very little impact on physical objects earthside?

Azrael And that's why I'm practising. Preparing. I want to help.

Raph *(Sighs)* You gonna be here long?

Azrael Yes, probably. I thought I might as well stick around until Jesus comes here to pray this evening. Hey, I've been meaning to ask you something actually, what with you being an expert in earthside announcement history and all.

Raph *(Perks up)* OK... what would you like to know?

Azrael Can you summarise what was said to the shepherds when the One and Only was born?

Raph Sure. In part 1 – the good news – they're told that the Saviour has been born, and yes, we are talking about the Messiah. Part 2 – the call to action – tells them to go to Bethlehem and see the place where he lays, which is – surprise! – an animals' feeding trough.

Azrael *(Dramatically, while moving right hand open palmed from in front to the side)* 'See the place where he lays!'

- Raph** That's right. Then of course the choir turn up and perform their show piece.
- Azrael** OK, so what about when Gabriel announced the Baptist's birth to Zechariah?
- Raph** Well, that message was slightly longer, but essentially the same format. Part 1 – the good news – Zechariah, you're going to be a dad! And in part 2 – the call to action – Zechariah is given some basic parenting advice, like 'Never give him any wine', because his son, the Baptist, would be the one to 'go ahead' of the One and Only, to prepare the way for the Messiah.
- Azrael** *(Dramatically, while pointing into the distance)* 'He will go ahead.'
- Raph** Why do you keep copying me?
- Azrael** Doesn't matter. Anything else I should know?
- Raph** Erm... yeah, every time an angel appears earthside, they're supposed to greet the recipient with the words, *(shouts, while raising arms up, spaced wide)* 'Do not be afraid!'
- Azrael** Really?
- Raph** Really.
- Azrael** Why? Why don't we just say 'Hi' or 'I come on God's behalf' or 'Nice-looking pickle you're eating there, if only I had a stomach!'
- Raph** *(Rolling his eyes)* I don't know, it's just the standard greeting.
- Azrael** *(Shouts, while raising arms up, spaced wide)* 'Do not be afraid!'
- Raph** Seriously, why do you keep saying stuff back to me?
- Azrael** It might come in useful if I'm the one who's called up for the special task.

Raph Azrael, you do know it'll be Gabe that God sends for any important announcements, right?

Azrael All I know is God told me to be prepared.

Raph God told you?

Azrael Well, yes. He told me because he told us.

Raph *(Patronisingly)* You sure you're not getting above your station?

Azrael *(Sarcastically, but delivered straight)* Well, I do want to make a name for myself.

Raph *(Shocked)* What?! But angels serve Almighty God. We're not supposed to crave recognition like humans do....

(Azrael rolls his eyes.)

Oh, you're joking.

Azrael Yes, I'm joking. Stop flapping.

(Azrael goes back to trying to move the stone.)

Look, I'm doing all this because I love him.

Raph We all love him, Az.

Azrael But since he's been human, I don't know, I just don't want to sing songs and carry incense and all the other usual heavenside stuff. I want to love him in an earthside way.

Raph But he's heavenside, always was, always will be.

Azrael True, but he's also truly and now eternally earthside as well. He's one of us and he's one of them. He's the connection between Heaven and earth. He's the reason we angels can venture earthside at all. He's... the One and Only.

Scene 3: Earthside, on the Mount of Olives

(Jesus kneels to one side, praying and clearly in huge distress. All the angels are on the other side, watching and cheering him on joyfully. Azrael struggles to watch, and looks pained.)

Jesus *(In discomfort)* Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. But... *(as if forcing himself to say the words)* do what you want, not what I want.

Choir & Raph *(Each of them start to shout words of encouragement, at the same time)* Come on, Jesus! You can do this! Keep going! Almost at the end now!

Raph Aren't you going to join in, Azrael?

Azrael I can't look, Raph. He's in distress. I don't care if he is the One and Only. He's facing torture, death, abandonment and separation from his Father. He needs someone earthside to help him through this.

Raph He's doing fine, he'll pull through.

Jesus *(Clenching fists, shouting out as if in agony)* Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. But... but...

(Azrael can't watch any longer whilst doing nothing, so he walks across, and kneels on one knee behind Jesus and gently rests a hand on Jesus's shoulder. The other angels look shocked that he has done this. Jesus does not acknowledge the angel's presence, but noticeably calms, taking deeper, slower breaths and unclenching his fists. Azrael removes his hand and walks off.)

Jesus *(Calmly)* Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. But... *(resolutely)* do what you want, not what I want.

Scene 4: Heavenside, the Triangle Office

(Azrael and Raphael walk with purpose. Azrael is calm and collected, and carrying a rucksack. Raphael is worried that Azrael (and possibly he too) is going to get into trouble with the Boss.)

Azrael I don't know what you're so worried about me for, Raph. I did something us angels have been doing for millennia: comfort someone in distress, reminding them of the spiritual reality that exists heavenside.

Raph Yes, but *(counts off on his fingers)* one, that someone was the One and Only. Two, your intervention might have altered the outcome of the most important mission in all of history! And three, we've both been summoned to the Triangle Office – that can't be good!

Azrael The One and Only needed strength, and I acted out of love. That's all that matters. You're being melodramatic.

(The two angels reach the sign for The Triangle Office and enter. There is a throne in the middle of the room, representing the (invisible) Boss. The two angels stand and direct their attention at the throne, as though The Boss is sitting in it the whole time. Azrael puts his rucksack at his feet. The Boss's voice booms out over the PA system when he speaks.)

The Boss Welcome, Azrael and Raphael.

Raph Hello, Lord! Look – I'm sorry about Azrael...

The Boss *(Interrupts)* Nonsense! Azrael, I've been impressed at how diligently you've prepared for the special task. I was touched that of all my angels, you were the only one to give him strength as he faced his toughest hours. And so I'd like you to be there by my Son's side when his earthside Resurrection Mission reaches its climax.

Azrael Really?! Thank you, thank you so much, Boss!

The Boss

I like you, Azrael. You're an angel of action. You don't have your head in the clouds. You're practical. Grounded... Very much like my Son.

(Azrael places his closed hand over his heart and bows his head, in gratitude.)

Raphael, I'd like you to be Azrael's helper.

(Raphael similarly places his closed hand over his heart and bows his head.)

What have you packed already?

Azrael

Oh, just some new clothes and a flask of water.

The Boss

Good, good. Make sure you also pack an earthquake. I know you've been practising moving rocks but a good earthquake will help you out no end. Plus, I think it might be quite humorous to see all those tough Roman guards shaking in their sandals.

Raph

Won't it scare the women on the way to the tomb?

The Boss

Are you serious? Have you seen how much courage they have? They're the only ones bold enough to go and attend to my Son's body – meanwhile the Twelve are still twiddling their thumbs behind locked doors.

Anyway, you two had best be on your way. Godspeed.

**Azrael
& Raph**

Godspeed.

(The angels leave, bowing their heads.)

Scene 5: Earthside, inside the tomb

(Azrael and Raphael stand, waiting for Jesus to be resurrected. Jesus is lying on a raised platform, wrapped in white sheets that cover his whole body and face.)

Azrael I'll stand here, by his feet.

Raph *(Humbly)* Listen, Azrael, you've been the only angel who understood how God wanted us to prepare for this task. You should be at his head.

Azrael Your name means 'God has healed', so you definitely need to be at his head. My name means 'God's helper', so my place is here, at his feet. *(Smirking)* Besides, you're my helper, so I get to tell you what to do.

(Both angels smile at each other, take up their places and look at Jesus' body.)

Raph What now?

Azrael *(Excited)* Now, we wait for the Son to rise!

(They concentrate on Jesus' body. Nothing happens for several seconds. Then, suddenly, Jesus sits up. Both gasp in amazement. Raphael immediately unwraps the sheets covering his head and Azrael takes the sheets off his body. Jesus smiles at the angels. Raphael bows, in reverence. Azrael, in contrast, embraces Jesus in a huge hug. Jesus stands up to walk out of the tomb.)

Jesus *(Looking at Azrael and motioning towards the tombstone)* Will you do the honours?)

(There is the sound of an earthquake and Azrael mimes rolling a huge stone to one side, before moving through the opening and sitting outside the tomb. Jesus walks off. A few moments later Mary walks up to the tombstone and drops to her knees, amazed. Raphael stays inside the tomb, folding up the graveclothes and placing them neatly where Jesus was lying, at the same time as whispering reminders to Azrael.)

(Azrael takes a breath as if to speak, but then pauses.)

Raph *(Whispers)* Standard greeting!

Azrael *(Warmly)* Do not be afraid.

Raph *(Whispers)* Part one – good news!

Azrael I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here – for he has been raised, as he said! Come! *(Spoken dramatically, while moving right hand open-palmed from in front to the side)* See the place where he lay!

(Azrael moves to one side and lets Mary into the tomb. She observes the neatly folded clothes. Raphael looks pleased with himself.)

Raph *(Whispers)* Part two – call to action!

Azrael Now go quickly to his disciples and tell them that the Son is risen, and that *(dramatically, while pointing into the distance)* he will go ahead *(normally)* of you to Galilee, where you will see him. This is my message for you.

(Mary runs off, amazed.)

(Azrael and Raphael look at each other and smile.)

Raph Mission accomplished!

Azrael *(Nods in agreement)* Job done.

(Raphael puts his hand around Azrael's shoulder and they walk off.)