

## **Were You There?**

### **A Hymn Story by Harry Eskew**

Among the rich traditions of American sacred song, no hymnal is considered complete without a selection of representative African American spirituals. This body of song has been described beautifully by Thea Bowman in her article “The Gift of African American Sacred Song.”

African men and women brought sacred songs and chants that reminded them of their homelands and that sustained them in separation and in captivity, songs to respond to all life situations, and the ability to create new songs to answer new needs,...preserving a holistic African spirituality of rhythms and tones and harmonies that communicated their deepest feelings across barriers of region and language,—in fields and quarters, at work, in secret meetings, in slave festivals, in churches, camp meets and revivals, wherever they met or congregated, consoled and strengthened themselves and one another with sacred song—moans, chants, shouts, psalms, hymns, and jubilees—in the crucible of separation and suffering African American sacred song was formed. (Preface to *Lead Me, Guide Me* 1987, quoted in Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 22.

These African American hymns, widely known as spirituals, constitute a part of every major American hymnal. One of the most frequently published spirituals is “Were You There,” a moving hymn focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. Although especially appropriate to be sung on Good Friday, this spiritual fits any service focusing on the sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of mankind.

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?  
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?*

*Were you there when the sun refused to shine?  
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble?  
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?*

*Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?*