In this season of pandemic, we find ourselves walking the way of the cross. It is our journey and that of our world, for this is a global way of the cross. We are witnesses and participants, and not by choice. As we follow the news, this journey grips us, even as we strive to create some semblance of normal life for ourselves and our loved ones. We are becoming intimately acquainted with the stories of others who are suffering before our eyes. It never leaves our awareness. Daily we carry with us fear and anguish, and grief. Even if we ourselves are not ill, we carry dis-ease in our bodies. Confined to home, we cannot easily escape into the busyness of work.

Still, we have hope because Jesus walked this way before us and he accompanies us even now with love and compassion. In this time, perhaps for the first time, we may come to truly understand the Paschal Mystery, not as a once-a-year liturgical celebration, but from the inside out, as the sum and substance of all human life on its way to God. In the darkest of days, Jesus promised, “And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all things to myself.” So let us reflect on his way of the Cross, looking for consolation amid desolation and life in the midst of death. Joined with him in his journey, we pray for insight, comfort and strength.

Suzanne Gagné-Bregman
Walnut Creek, CA
April, 2020
I  JESUS IS CONDEMNED

Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow stands silent. He has been betrayed and abandoned by his own, condemned by politicians and power brokers. He is jeered by a mob of the small-minded and the fearful. Yet their judgment cannot touch him. He is utterly and completely himself – alone, but not isolated, rooted in the Father yet human and vulnerable. By his own irrevocable choice, he is forever one with us and for us. He stands before us as the Truth, the Way, the Life. He is Light, the Word that heals and forgives. “Ecce homo!” “Behold the man!”

REFLECTION

After just a few weeks of sheltering in place, the life we had, the life we took for granted, seems a distant memory. All we relied on to keep us safe, all that separated us from the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, and the most vulnerable in our society, seems to have vanished like smoke. Still, this is a not a time of judgment but for judgment.

The grace of this moment is that time and space is given to us to step back for a while to reclaim our essential humanity. A disease that does not discriminate among its victims reveals our interdependence and our limits, the inequities in our society, our need for one another and for God.

PRAYER

Open our eyes and hearts, O God, to see the choices we are offered in this time of trial. We cannot change history, but as we begin this way of the cross, in your mercy forgive us our past failures. As we go forward, may our responses to this crisis be worthy of those who name themselves your disciples.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
II JESUS ACCEPTS HIS CROSS

The cross is stark. Rough. Terrifying. It promises nothing but pain. Its burden is overwhelming, its end point, death. Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow, accepts it, embraces it. This is neither fate nor resignation; it is initiative. It is the sign that contradicts. With this cross Jesus will free us, make us whole, unburden us of all that holds us back from a full and total response to the Father.

REFLECTION

From the confines of a kind of house arrest, imposed by a virus we cannot see and against which we have no defense, we look outward at a world that seems increasingly defined by limits and losses, trauma and terror. It is hard to wrap our minds and hearts around what is unfolding before our eyes. Even the simple routines we took for granted are gone; what life will later be is uncertain and not in our control.

The grace of this moment is found in the first step taken in faith while noticing the possibilities and small gifts that open up as we put one foot in front of another: humor, connection, music, learning, beauty, contentment, compassion . . . Since all we are given with certainty is the present moment, all we have to give is the response we make here and now. That is where Jesus himself began.

PRAYER

Grant us, O God, the courage of the first step, then the next and the next. You who will not let a sparrow fall without notice are surely paying attention. We cling tightly to your hand, even as the tears stream down our faces.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
III  JESUS FALLS

The one we love, the one we follow falters. Jesus stumbles, then catches the heavy cross before it hits the ground, but his knees take the jarring punishment. His body is weakening under the strain of grief, stress, torture, and a night without sleep. For Jesus, this is a moment of decision. He struggles to his feet, regains his balance with no one to help. He lurches to standing. His courage is as stark as the cross that drove him to his knees.

REFLECTION

Life before pandemic seems like a distant dream. Days and nights seem to merge. Who even knows what day it is when our calendars are stripped of the milestones and markers that root us in time? We struggle for words to reassure our children and our frail elders, to create routines to structure our days. Sometimes we fail. We cannot even reassure ourselves. Our tempers are frayed, our hearts, exhausted. Just getting up and dressed seems like a major decision.

The grace of this moment is found in a smile dredged up from some mysterious source deep within us, a walk that recharges us, the antics of a pet, unexpected cooperation from a teenager, a child who actually does schoolwork or sets the table unasked. These give us courage.

PRAYER

Teach us, O God, patience and compassion – starting with ourselves. Grant us every gift of the Spirit, including ones we’ve never heard of and don’t know we need. We fall early and often as we struggle to navigate this new terrain. May gentleness and forgiveness lift us to our feet with each new day and each new challenge.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.  
Summon out what I shall be.  
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
IV JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow, now encounters his mother. The world stops and falls away in one brief shared look that embraces all their life together – every memory, every joy, every loss, and all that is yet to come on this day. The moment passes and Jesus, under duress, moves on.

For Mary, it is yet another moment of surrender to a God who promises favor, without detail, all the while counseling, “Do not be afraid.” All her life she has reflected on events as they unfolded, seeking the grace therein and finding it. “Blessed are you among women.” From that deep well of experience, even now, she finds it within herself to say, “Be it done to me according to your word.” The prophet surely said of her: “To what shall I compare you, O daughter Jerusalem? . . . For great as the sea is your distress.” (Lamentations 2:13)

REFLECTION

Before this pandemic is done, how many families will face a moment like this? How many loved ones will be separated at the door of home or hospital not knowing whether they will ever be reunited. How many will lack the consolation of a beloved’s gaze or embrace when everything in them aches for this simple connection to ease the way? It wrenches the soul to imagine such partings.

The grace of this moment is found, day by day, in treasuring the gifts of grace embodied in those we love, in telling them in a hundred ways how much they mean to us. So it is that we build the relationships and memories that sustain us and bring us consolation.

PRAYER

Like a nursing mother, loving God, you do not fail to remember us. Hold us in your care, preserve us safely in the shelter of your wing, even in sickness and grief. Strengthen our faltering faith and teach us to walk faithfully into mystery beyond our ken.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
V SIMON OF CYRENE HELPS JESUS

Jesus staggers. The weight of the cross is crushing him. It is clear. The one we love, the one we follow cannot bear this burden alone. He may not make it to the death that is planned for him, so a foreigner is pressed into service to carry the cross. Jesus is dependent on the kindness of strangers.

As for Simon, going about his business in town, life happened and brought him to the side of Jesus. Was he reluctant or willing to take on this terrible load? No matter. In the event, he hefted the cross on his own shoulder and surely found himself unalterably changed.

REFLECTION

We hear endless stories of generosity these days. All kinds of people are shopping for those at risk and confined to home. Legions of quilters and newbie sewers are making face masks for first responders, hospital workers, and senior centers. They are pressed into service, not by governments and public officials, but by the urgings of their own hearts. They find lessons, support and new friends across the country by internet. The pandemic has broken through our self-absorption and apathy, our excuses and our solitary screen time.

The grace of the moment is found in giving and receiving care, even at a social distance, and discovering that this is the privileged place where we matter more than we ever imagined.

PRAYER

Loving Creator, you call us by name. From birth you have built in us amazing strength and capability. Free us now to see and share those gifts with sisters and brothers in wider and wider circles until no one is alone and all humanity is one. May our more generous hearts be a lasting legacy of these days of trial.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
VI  JESUS ENCOUNTERS VERONICA

Even on this terrible journey, consolation comes to Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow. A solitary woman, Veronica, breaks through the crowd to offer brief relief from the sweat and blood that bathes his face and blurs his vision. In an intimate gesture reminiscent of Jesus’ supper service to his disciples, she bares her head and uses her veil as towel to gently wipe his face. Legend has it that the image of Jesus’ face remained there. He always returns a hundredfold. But the greater gift was his likeness imprinted forever in her heart.

REFLECTION

The faces of our suffering sisters and brothers radiate nonstop from our TV’s and electronic devices. We see doctors and nurses garbed in trash bags and bandannas in lieu of personal protective gear. In our mind’s eye, we see thousands living in jails and detention camps, the unemployed and under-employed, those living in food deserts, on the streets and in nursing home, even military people in confined quarters – all at risk and under-served. It is the stuff of nightmares waking us in the night.

The grace of this moment calls us to aid those suffering as best we can. But more, it calls us to righteous anger at inequities we take for granted and urgent action to address the broken systems of our society and our government.

PRAYER

May we, O God, no longer be bystanders. For too long we have chosen not to see the suffering all around us, and when we do see it, we hesitate and dither. Let the images of this pandemic haunt us until our broken hearts compel us to wipe the face of Jesus in our day, and we ourselves are remade in his likeness.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
VII  JESUS FALLS AGAIN

Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow, falls again. Totally spent, he cannot catch himself. His face is scraped by stones, his mouth filled with dirt. His strength is ebbing, his mind disoriented. To the weight of the cross is added a devastating bleakness of spirit that, in its dreadful aloneness, sees only failure upon failure. It is all too much. How can he go on?

REFLECTION

At some earlier time, we may have interrogated God about the “why” of suffering, but nothing has prepared us for anguish and anxiety on this scale. Yes, from a safe distance, we have observed massive suffering elsewhere. We may have known real suffering in our own small world. But we now understand in a quite absolute way that we ourselves and our whole society are literally not immune. It shakes us to the core.

The grace of this moment is a call to trust in God when nothing else suffices to lift us up, to go on “as if,” even when we do not feel God’s presence. Ours is an incarnate faith. God’s answer to our pain and all our questions is no less than the fallen Jesus whose body is given for us. Our cross is his. As we carry it, he walks with us. He falls and rises with us again and again until at last our despair becomes his and his hope becomes ours.

PRAYER

We beseech you, loving God, for mercy equal to the crisis that overwhelms us. Preserve us in hope. Make us know in our bones our kinship with Jesus who accompanies us when we are prostrate with pain and can see no future before us.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
VIII  THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM WEEP

Women of Jerusalem encounter Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow. They stand at some distance, but near enough to make their presence felt. Wailing and weeping they grieve for him. In his extremity, Jesus who stood silent before Pilate, finds words for these women who stand in a long line of grieving mothers, backward and forward in time. He knows the grief yet to come. He joins his tears to theirs as he wept over his friend Lazarus.

REFLECTION

Would that there were more tears shed over the state of our world and the planet. Statistics mean nothing. The murder of six million, the deaths of thousands, are but the multiplication of a single precious life extinguished. Not one is disposable or expendable. Each is a light gone from the world, a network of relationships severed, possibilities cut short.

The grace of this moment, at a terrible cost, is the gift of tears welling up, tears shed alone and tears shared that reinforce our common humanity. Tears soften hearts and remind us to live fully, to do no harm to another, to give comfort as we can, to nurture life and joy where we find it. God weeps with us.

PRAYER

God above, hear our plea.
Turn your eyes of mercy here to light our way.
Stay with us, Lord of all.
All we seek, all we’ve lost
we find in you.

— Refrain from “Well of Tears” by Robert Dufford, SJ, in Morning Light

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
IX   JESUS FALLS A THIRD TIME

He falls. One last time. Each step is torture. The one who would not prostrate himself before the Tempter in the desert is utterly prostrated by the cross he has taken up. A lifetime ago he pinned his very identity to the mission given him by his Father. The cross and his mission are now one and the same. Flattened by its weight, he is one with the poor, the sick, the possessed and dispossessed, the helpless and the hopeless. Lying in the dust he carries out his mission still. He rises against all odds to complete it.

REFLECTION

In these days, the count of the sick and dead grows with mind-numbing speed; grief covers the earth like a mushroom cloud. Media coverage is relentless and carries the toll into our living rooms. It is not so hard to comprehend this final prostration of Jesus. Scientists race to discover a vaccine and a cure, only to fail daily. The weight of that failure is a terrible burden, but they do not stop.

The grace of this moment is to discover, perhaps for the first time, that because we follow Jesus, our identity too is pinned to the struggle of discipleship, not to our success. Our mission plays out as much in the dust as on the cross.

PRAYER

See, most merciful God, the flaws and failings from which we so often seek deliverance. Take note of all the broken, resistant places that shame and discourage us. May these very imperfections become our teachers, a source of blessing and a wellspring of hope.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
**JESUS IS STRIPPED**

Stripped. Naked. Alone. No covering for his body, no dignity, no human rights. Nothing is left to Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow, except himself and God alone. They thought to shame him, the prophet, the truth-teller, by exposing him to public view. What is revealed instead, as in a mirror, is the truth they hide under a carefully crafted façade of religiosity. Now is laid bare their venality and service of expediency, their jealousy, and yes, their culpability. Love stands before them unmasked and receives only rage and ridicule.

**REFLECTION**

Coping with this contagion has roughly stripped away the veneer concealing the wounds in our social fabric. With human lives at stake and none exempt, fissures in the body politic and the vulnerability of the least among us are relentlessly displayed. It shames us all. Even as the pandemic threatens our bodies, it holds up a mirror for our self-examination. Who are we when not defined by what we have and what we do? To what do we cling as if to life itself?

The grace of this moment is found in the invitation to holy detachment from all that is not essential, save God alone. Therein we discover true freedom and our inherent dignity.

**PRAYER**

Lover and Lord of all, through this time of trial, this time apart, gently reveal us to ourselves. Release us from the desires and attachments that burden us and separate us from one another. May we cling to you alone and learn to live lightly on the earth in gratitude, joy and peace.

**MUSIC**

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
XI  JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

Hold the nail, pound. Repeat . . . Hold the nail, pound. Repeat . . . a shattering tempo untold by Isaiah. Use perfect knowledge of anatomy to drive through tendon, muscle, bone until the body can hold itself upright against its own agonizing weight. No matter that these skillful, gentle, calloused hands had crafted wood, blessed, healed, washed feet, and raised the dead. Jesus, the one we love, the one we follow, offers hands and feet to the torturer in one last surrender of control over his body. In later days, Easter days, he will say: “Look at my hands and feet,” and these wounds, like fingerprints containing all his history, will enable anyone anywhere to recognize him.

REFLECTION

The end of this pandemic will be a long time coming. We feel hammered in place while sheltering in place, nailed by restrictions and precautions that leave us craving escape. This crisis will end, but we will be marked by it forever. We cannot imagine the world to come, but it will not be the same, and we will not forget. Will we ever be able to approach anyone with casual ease? Will we ever again feel safe in spaces closer than six feet, be comfortable with hugs and handshakes at restaurants, and ball games, and concerts? Still we hope against hope that somehow the world will be better.

The grace of this moment is in the gift of surrender to the circumstances and discipline of these days, listening for what God may ask of us and open to what God will make of us.

PRAYER

You are the potter, O God, and we, the clay. In your wisdom, shape us again and again on the wheel of your love, until when finally we emerge from these terrible days, all will recognize us as disciples of Jesus because we are so like him.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
XII JESUS DIES

Labor. For three eternal hours his heart labors on. Any bystander can see it pumping as his chest lurches with each tortured breath. This Jesus, the one we the one we love, the one we follow, is enthroned between two thieves, mocked and abandoned, but for those standing vigil: a mother, a beloved friend, a few faithful women. But it is his labor alone. “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:19) He cries out in the birth pangs of creation straining toward redemption. Then . . . “It is finished,” and in death he releases his Spirit into the world.

REFLECTION

This virus attacks the lungs in a quite insidious way. For those seriously afflicted, difficulty breathing is one of its hallmarks. The struggle to breathe so tires the sufferer that machines are needed to give relief and time to recover. There are not enough machines. Many will die in hospitals, without family, in the company of faithful care givers traumatized by their inability to do more. Others will die at home, alone.

The grace of this moment is to grasp somehow that there is no way through this passion but through it. We ourselves are the pregnant creation groaning in long labor for the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8). When we tire, Jesus’ own Spirit breathes in us and for us, all the while making of our wordless cries a desperate prayer for deliverance.

PRAYER

Who can know your mind, O God of our longing? You work only for our good. Be with us as we labor in painful hope but without understanding. Help us patiently stay the course until this cup passes and this world is reborn.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
XIII  JESUS IS TAKEN FROM THE CROSS

There are no words now. Silently, this mother receives the broken body of a son unjustly slain, Jesus, the one we the one we love, the one we follow. Her tears bathe his wounded body as once she washed his tender limbs and wrapped them tight in swaddling clothes. Now, as then, she holds him close. Where once she crooned over him with delight, now she grieves his sudden absence like a severed limb. Once she was mother to an only son; now it is she who is orphaned but mysteriously given more daughters and sons than there are stars in the heavens.

REFLECTION

Before this is over, we will all be somehow orphaned, bereft of people we have known and loved and some we have never met. They are all Rachel’s children untimely lost, and we will not be comforted. We will mourn for all we have lost as one mourns for an only child, grieve bitterly as one grieves for a firstborn child. (Zechariah 12:10)

The grace of this moment is to receive the ministrations of Mary, the mother we never knew in the flesh, but our mother nonetheless for all time and through all generations. From her hard-won experience, she possesses more wisdom than the universe itself can claim. She passes on to us this gift: “Do whatever he tells you.” So will ordinary water be made the wine of celebration in our day.

PRAYER

God of mercy, you know our broken hearts. In your triune nature you gaze upon our world with love and see its beauty and its pain. May all our tears and yours water the earth and make it fruitful and peaceful, a bounty of blessing for all from the least to the greatest.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
XIV  JESUS IS LAID IN THE GRAVE

“Peace be with you.” More than a wish, it is a greeting, a blessing, an injunction. Peace has come to Jesus, the one we the one we love, the one we follow. Peace has come at untold cost, but it has come, and still it comes. Despite appearances, this peace is neither confined nor defined by the tomb. It is active, a life force. In the stillness of this grave, while all creation holds its breath, the Spirit of the dying Jesus becomes the very lungs of the cosmos.

REFLECTION

With bitter irony, Pilate spoke truth when he named Jesus “king” and fixed that title to the cross. The grave of Jesus bore no marker. None was needed, for his name is engraved on our hearts. He knows us by that name and claims us as his own. To us, the weary and the burdened, his promise remains: “I am gentle and humble of heart and here you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11: 28-30)

The grace of this moment is found in a retreat not of our making, awaiting what we cannot yet see, but hope for with the surety of faith. Even in tight quarters with more family time than some of us ever imagined, in the company of Jesus, we can learn the unforced rhythms of grace and find much needed and surprising rest.

PRAYER

Bring us to stillness, O God who rested on creation’s final day. In solitary walks, amid flowers on hillsides, under the silence of the stars, in the laughter of loved ones, in depths of our own being, may we find healing and wholeness that only you can give.

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
XV    JESUS RISES

Jesus said, ‘Mary.’ Turning to face him, she said in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ meaning “Teacher!” Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me . . . But find the brothers and tell them: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

(John 20: 17)

REFLECTION

Mary Magdala’s Easter Prayer

When Jesus appears to Mary Magdala in the garden, he asks her not to touch him —

I never suspected Resurrection to be so painful to leave me weeping
With joy to have met you, alive and smiling, outside an empty tomb
With regret not because I’ve lost you but because I’ve lost you in how I had you –
in understandable, touchable, kissable, clingable flesh
not as fully Lord, but as graspably human.

I want to cling, despite your protest clinging to your body clinging to your, and my, clingable humanity clinging to what we had, our past.

But I know that...if I cling you cannot ascend and I will be left clinging to your former self . . . unable to receive your present spirit.

— Fr. Ronald Rolheiser

MUSIC

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.
Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be; set your seal up-on my heart and live in me.

Text: John L. Bell, b.1949
Tune: John L. Bell, b.1949
© 1995; Iona Community. GIA Publications, Inc., agent
CREDITS

The stations of the cross mounted at St. Perpetua Church, Lafayette, California, are from the Via Dolorosa series, digital art by artist Lianne Schneider (1946-2015), reproduced on metal, available from FineArtAmerica.com.

The Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was lit up with the flags of countries currently afflicted by the coronavirus. Photograph by Silvia Izquierdo/AP


Take, O Take Me, text and tune: John L. Bell, b. 1949, © 1995, Iona Community, GIA Publications, Inc.

“Well of Tears” (prayer for Station 8)), text and music © 2001, Robert J. Dufford, SJ. In Morning Light, published by OCP. All rights reserved.