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# *Reflections on the Stations of the Cross*

Written by  
Wes Williams

(Lent, 2005)

## First Station – Jesus is sentenced to death.

Death is a necessary part of life. Death has been present on earth since the first single cell emerged. In order for life to continue death must occur. Each of us--every cell, bacteria, fungi, plant, animal, and human—is in effect sentenced to death. It is in the conscious act of condemning innocent life to an unnecessary and premature death that we ‘sin’. Our culture is in countless ways built upon the intentional sentencing of an untold number of innocents to death. And because we are all so deeply embedded in this culture of death none of us, no matter what we may want to believe, have hands washed clean of innocent blood. By being a part of this culture and this world we condemn some innocent life form to death daily. The more conscious we become of these daily death sentences the more deeply we are moved to empathy, compassion and mercy. The more profoundly we sense the loss.

Reflection or Lectio Divinia: “Jesus was taken away.” [REB]

## Fourteenth Station - Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

“ . . .in the garden was a tomb. . .there they lai Jesus.” (John 19:40-42) Our journey began when we faced the truth that all that have the breath of life are condemned to death. Now we have come to the tomb to confront the crushing reality of that truth. We are exhausted with the realization and contemplation of the suffering that has accompanied us on this walk. We are almost relieved the end has finally come. We mourn, certainly, but it is now a reflective mourning.

How can we not grow weary from the seemingly endless vision of death that is before us daily? How can we not weep at knowing how many innocent creatures who have been deprived of any dignity for their entire lives each day are mercilessly, wantonly slaughtered? How can we not grieve for the magnitude of violence and destruction that is occurring throughout the world? How can we not be overwhelmed at the vast reaches of this culture of death? Where do we find hope? Where do we find grace? Where do we find the strength to wipe away the tears and face the future. How can we not weep when we look upon this garden God has given humankind knowing how poorly we have cared for it and all the creatures in it.

But in the garden is our hope. It is fitting that the body of Jesus was laid in a garden tomb. For in the garden is the hope of spring. In the garden life faithfully reemerges every season. No matter how bitterly cold, or how harsh the winter the garden will come back to life. And with it the little things of the garden that Jesus cherished so much in his short life, the sparrows, the wildflowers, the dove, the fruits of the trees, and at seasons end the tiny seeds. In the garden we learn how lavishly nature will respond when cared for with loving attention. From the garden comes beauty and renewed life.

Now the season is upon us when new life cannot be resisted. The yearly resurrection of once dormant life now greets our eyes and cheers our hearts. What seemed dead throughout winters frozen reign now warms, rises, grows and bears fruit. Life emerges from dormancy, potential becomes actuality. Keep watch in the garden and you will see the greening power of God as the face of the earth is renewed and restored. In the garden we find hope, we take solace, and we are comforted as we begin anew the work God set for us in Eden. For we are placed here to cultivate and care for the garden and all that lives in the garden.

Reflection: Take a moment and hold in your thoughts one for whom you had a deep bond who has died. Lay them in the garden tomb with Jesus. On Easter Sunday reflect upon how they too have ‘risen’.

“Blessed are those who mourn for the shall be comforted.”  
[Matthew 5:4]

## Thirteenth Station – Jesus is taken down from the Cross

“Then having brought a linen shroud, Joseph took him down, wrapped him in the linen. . .’ (Mark 15:46). Joseph of Arimathea is portrayed as a wealthy, distinguished member of the Sanhedrin as well a somewhat marginal disciple of Jesus. Marginal because while he was one who “looked forward to the reign of God” he was not able to speak out publicly on behalf of Jesus at his trial. Despite his lack of courage at Jesus’ trial the image of Joseph himself physically taking Jesus down from the cross and lovingly wrapping the body in linen is deeply moving. Even more so when we understand how such an act of compassion and mercy would be seen by the Jewish authorities. In addition to the negative social consequences the act of touching a dead body would have also made him ‘unclean’ for Passover.

There are many individuals who feel deeply for the plight of animals but are unable to publicly proclaim such counter cultural views because of the family, social and professional risks involved. Like Joseph they find themselves in silent opposition to a culture that blindly accepts such cruelty but find it difficult to articulate that opposition. Some would prefer being vegetarian but because of family habits and pressure are unable to do so. Some feel deeply about animal rights and environmental issues but are inhibited from speaking out in the work place for fear of ridicule or isolation. Sadly many have spiritual concerns about hunting, exploitation of animals in entertainment and factory farming but dare not say so to fellow church members. These individuals need our prayers that God strengthen them in their convictions. We need to seek them out and give them our friendship, love, patience and support. A day may dawn in which they do in fact answer their own call to mercy. A day may come when they find the courage of Joseph of Arimathea and exceed our own often over-rated, self-righteousness. Then we will stand humbled by the good they have done. Ask yourself where were Peter, John, James or any of the other disciples when it came time to take Jesus off the cross? And take a moment to consider how people unknown to us may already be showing deep tenderness for some innocent victim.

Reflection – Am I sometimes smugly self-righteous about my public stand on animal/environmental issues? Might some people who are more restrained in their support be doing as much or more than I?

“Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, He gives strength to the fainting; for the weak he makes vigor abound.” [Isaiah 35:3-4]

“Though young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall, They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagles’ wings; They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.” [Isaiah 40: 29-31]

“We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all.” [1 Thessalonians 5:14]

## Second Station – Jesus carries His cross.

We thrust the burden of our selfishness, our unrestrained appetites, our consumerist lifestyle, our spiritual blindness upon God’s creation. We fail to see the presence of Christ in all that has the breath of life. We do not see with a loving eye. We see with an arrogant, controlling eye. We do not see animals as subjects, only objects to be used for our own ends. We reject and deny the divine light that shines through their eyes and with callousness and wanton disregard we force them to carry a cross of shame for us in short, horrific tortured lives in factory farms in zoos, or as ‘entertainment’. But unlike those who witnessed Jesus carrying His cross we do not see their pain, we do not hear their anguished cries. For us there is none of the sweaty, bloody immediacy that confronted the crowd on Good Friday. We have sanitized and marginalized the process. They carry their cross in oblivion. No, we are not witnesses, we dare not witness it. We are simply silent bystanders averting our eyes from the crushing weight of the reality. Our hearts go out to all those creatures who carry this cross in our times: May the Holy One lighten their burden with the knowledge that they are not alone, that others care and hope for their liberation.

“Jesus was led away carrying the cross by himself”  
[John 19:17]

## Third Station - Jesus Falls.

### Downers

"Although downed animals are frequently in severe pain, they are rarely euthanized or anesthetized, as that would translate into a lost carcass and additional expenses. Often spread-eagled on the floor of the trailers, unable to stand or walk, these hapless animals are chained by their broken legs and dragged from the truck onto the loading ramp to await their turn for slaughter."

[*Beyond Beef*, Jeremy Rifkin]

"But he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins."

## Twelfth Station – Jesus Dies on the Cross

Altruism can be defined as a behavior which benefits another but reduces the altruist's ability to survive. There are numerous accounts of animals risking their lives and comfort not only for their own species but also across species boundaries. Who has not heard stories of dogs taking some heroic action that saved the life of a guardian, or of some total stranger, or even another animal? Such actions may be more common throughout the animal kingdom than we realize as university trained scientists often don't see them because they don't believe it's possible.

So how are we to understand such selfless actions if they are not discounted as aberrations. Some will contend they are merely a kind of reciprocal altruism in that an apparently selfless act somehow serves to insure the genetic survival of the individual. This is known as the 'selfish gene' theory. This theory does nothing to explain the many stories told of animals attempting to save the life of a non-related animal. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson describes such an event which took place in Kenya where a group of elephants attempted to save a baby rhino who had become hopelessly stuck in deep mud. Their rescue efforts continued unabated despite repeated attacks from the infant's mother. The selfish gene theory does not do justice to the spiritual depths from which these kind of selfless actions spring. For these deeds of selflessness come from the very soul and the very heart of the animal. They are truly inspired by the Spirit of God and are proof of just how fundamental Love is to the underlying structure of the universe.

Love is part of the very fabric of God's creation. It is not just about the 'survival of the fittest' but also about providing mutual aid within a community even when individuals do so at great risk to themselves. This need to assist the 'other' must surely be from the Spirit as it runs counter to the instinct of self-preservation. Did Jesus want to die as a result of his mission and ministry? The Biblical evidence suggest otherwise. For in the garden he cries out for God to take away the cup he was about to drink. Yet He was ultimately moved by the Spirit to put aside self-interest. On the night of his betrayal Jesus taught how fundamental such sacrifice was to a life lived in communion with God when he said, "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:12-13

Altruism in animals is a reflection of the spark of divinity within all life. It is a movement of God's grace. For God desires that "none should perish but that all should be saved" and that desire may be expressed through any of His creatures. One need not literally die oneself in this act, but one must certainly die to the lesser self which is concerned solely with its own survival. This is how the Kingdom of God dawns upon earth.

Reflection: Call to mind any stories you are aware of in which an animal has risked their life to save another. Reflect upon the source of that action.

"I put no value on my life if only I can finish my race and complete the service to which I have been assigned by the Lord Jesus, bearing witness to the gospel of God's grace." [Acts 20:24, NAB)

## Eleventh Station - Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

There are numerous movies that graphically depict the nailing of Jesus to the crossbeam. For many of us this is the most deeply disturbing of scenes and in this moment we feel an overwhelming surge of compassionate empathy for Jesus. The violent finality of the act is so poignant and the sudden realization of the unimaginable pain is often vividly portrayed. There is an intensity in this image of pounding nails through human flesh and bone that sends shockwaves through the heart. In Jesus' time this was an act of Roman terrorism. It was not an act of sadistic torture meant for the victim alone but was also done for the lasting impact it had upon those who were watching. Today we are standing by and watching the crucifixion of God's creation.

It is estimated that by the year 2050 the human population will stand at over ten billion. In 15 years the demand for meat will double. According to some experts 95 percent of the world's rainforests will be depleted or destroyed. 137 species will go extinct today and by the end of the year that number will be 50,000. When will we hammer the final nail of crucifixion into God's Creation? When will our acts of violence against the natural world immobilize it to the point where its ability to recover will be forever shattered? Can we bear to ponder for one moment the immensity of the pain we inflict every second of every minute of every hour upon God's creatures?

How did Jesus respond to those responsible for his torture and agony? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." Are we truly ignorant of what we are doing? Have you ever seen Jesus' prayer speak through the eyes of an animal? Have you ever heard this prayer in the silent, stunned gaze of a cow about to be slaughtered? Or heard it whispered from the heart of an abandoned family pet about to be euthanized? If you have heard this prayer then your heart has broken and the Spirit of God has rushed in to give comfort and consolation. And if you have heard the prayer for forgiveness you are called to shine the gospel light so brightly that the world does KNOW what is being done. For perhaps in this knowledge will come a turning away from these acts of cruelty. If you have not yet heard this cry for forgiveness coming from the depths of Creation, please listen, you will hear it and you will be forgiven. Once you hear the Spirit's plea for forgiveness certainly you will turn away and hasten to "do good, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God."

**Reflection:** How might I shine the gospel light upon some act of ignorant cruelty and through the shining of that light bring someone to hear the prayer for forgiveness?

"The compassion of human beings is for their neighbors, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing."

[Book of Sirach 18:13 (NRSV)]

## Fourth Station – Jesus meets His mother.

The nurturing love of a mother is one source, perhaps the very fountainhead of empathic, protective compassion in our world. Observing a mother cat with her newborn kittens has forever imprinted itself upon my heart. Paws outstretched lying across their tiny bodies with such love and contentment flowing from her eyes! Seeing a young mare with her newborn foal one can only stand in awe at the depth of love she feels and tenderly expresses with her nudges and whinnies. Each creature I see calls into my heart with the love of its mother. Yet by our actions we brutally sever this fundamental bond, this life giving love. We shatter it with an unimaginable insensitivity when rip young calves from their mothers and force them into veal cages. We sin against this love when poachers shoot chimpanzees and leave helpless infants to die from mourning and neglect. We cruelly deny the comforting solace a sow willing, lovingly extends to her piglets by forcing them to feed through the cold bars of horrid feeding 'crates'. Hens, who have become egg machines, never are allowed to cluck to, nuzzle and protect the fruit of their labor. Yet here Jesus, for one brief precious moment, was allowed a comfort only his mother could offer. Jesus receives the gentle touch of mother-love amidst this tortuous event that he knew was to be his death. But we deprive our animal brothers and sisters of even the smallest grace as they walk to their lonely death. What greater sin than to deny any living thing the compassionate touch of its mother? Jesus clearly knew of the great love of mothers, recognized it, and taught it when he said: "How often I yearned to gather your children, as a mother bird gathers her young under her wings, but you refused me." Jesus had one last moment under his mother's outstretched 'wings'. What of the veal calves? The chimpanzees? The piglets? The chicks?

Scripture reflection: ". . .and you to shall be pierced to the heart." [REB]

## **Fifth Station - Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross.**

Why did the soldiers select Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross? Was it a sympathetic look in his eye? Did he cry out for mercy and justice? Or was he simply an innocent bystander grabbed from amongst the crowd of gawking onlookers. We will never know for certain how willingly Simon accepted what was thrust upon him by circumstance. We have a hint of how it may have transformed him as the Christian writer Papias (died around 130) suggests that Simon later himself become a Christian, though this must remain conjecture. What we know for certain is that Simon did carry the cross of Jesus and thus was an instrument of God's grace and mercy. We pray that God may grant us the grace to gladly bear the burdens that are daily thrust upon animals throughout the world. We give thanks for all those who work in shelters, rescue groups, and animal sanctuaries. We are thankful for the activists who take great risks to reveal to a heartless world the horrors of factory farms. And we are also truly thankful for those innocent bystanders who when presented with the opportunity to show some small kindness to a stray cat or dog do so. We are thankful for those who have the strength and courage to be a witness in our communities of God's love for all creation and all creatures. Let us renew our commitment to be compassionate and merciful to all who are suffering an injustice. To show kindness, mercy, and love to those creatures of God we so thoughtlessly marginalize and abuse. Let us resolve anew to carry their cross whenever and wherever we are given the opportunity.

"God in Heaven, Whose tender mercies are over all Your works, send Your blessing on those who minister to sick and suffering animals and hasten the day when the whole of the animal creation shall be delivered from the bondage of cruelty and fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

-- F.O. Owens

"Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light."

[New American Bible]

## **Tenth Station ^ Jesus is Stripped of His Garments**

We strip animals of their inherent, God given dignity when we use them for sport and entertainment. We strip zoo animals of their dignity when we put them in prison cages to gawk, stare and laugh at them. We rob greyhounds and horses of their dignity when we breed them exclusively for races and then causally, without mercy, cast them aside when they no longer serve our perverse purposes. We strip wild animals of their dignity when we violate their privacy with zoom lens photography which reveals even the most their most intimate of moments. We call this science to justify our arrogant, demeaning gaze. We strip any vestige of dignity from hens when we force them to live out horrid lives in tiny cages covered in the filth of their sisters, diseased and enslaved. And when we use fox, mink, rabbit and chinchillas for fashion this is perhaps the most hideous and brutal of all for we strip them of their very skins.

We now understand nature as a seamless garment, yet like the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' tunic without a seam, we treat it as if it were a commodity to be possessed. We strip all creation of the dignity it has before God. We do not act like stewards; we act like the soldiers dividing up the garments of nature for our own selfish, personal gain. We are blind to that which stands naked before us.

Reflection: How can I work today to restore the dignity of some animal that has had it stripped away by human perversity?

Reflect upon how the following scripture as it applies to the plight of animals:

**To subvert my paths they rise up:**

**They build their approaches for my ruin.**

**To destroy me, they attack with none to stay them:**

**As through a wide breach they advance.**

**Amid the uproar they come on in waves:**

**Over me rolls the terror.**

**My dignity is borne off on the wind,**

**And my welfare vanishes like a cloud.**

**One with great power lays hold of my clothing:**

**By the collar of my tunic he seizes me:**

**He has cast me into the mire:**

**I am leveled with the dust and ashes.**

[Job 30:12-19]

## **Ninth Station - Jesus Falls the Third Time**

It is not about falling a third time; it is about rising from the fall one more time to fulfill that which the Spirit is calling of all us to do. Whether one is working for peace, social justice, the environment or animal care issues it seems that daily we are beaten down by an onslaught of depressing news and a new round of discouragement, exhaustion and frustration. How can we not suffer from compassion fatigue? We struggle to carry on one more day in the face of what seems to be a hopeless, endless task. A task with precious little relief or comfort. We are knocked down again and again and again. We are all so weary with the burden we have chosen to carry. We are bruised and we are broken. But as a Benedictine monk once remarked, "always we begin again." We must somehow get back on our feet and continue moving forward with love and mercy in our every step. We are pulled forward by hope, by the belief that ultimately we will not be forsaken in our work and ministries. We take comfort in knowing that in Jesus we find the God of love who suffers with us and every *creatura de Dios* (creature of God). Today is about rising one more time to face the inevitable with a heart of mercy. Today we begin again to fight back lethargy, apathy and indifference. We continue to give love and kindness to each and every creature that crosses our path and to those unseen millions who are secretly dependent upon our efforts towards the redemption of all creation, towards the day the Spirit groans for and the full realization of God's kingdom on earth! And "always we begin again."

"Tell them: Thus says the Lord: When someone falls, does he not rise again? If he goes astray does he not turn back?"  
Jeremiah 8:4

"For the just man falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble to ruin."  
[Proverbs 24:16]

## **Sixth Station - Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus.**

A tradition of the church teaches that the shroud of Turin is not the only relic believed to reveal the image of Christ. Somewhat lesser known, but equally well-guarded and revered (and disputed), is the veil of Veronica. According to the legend a pious matron named Veronica took pity on Jesus as he was carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to his crucifixion. She stepped forward from the crowd and wiped the blood and sweat from his face with her veil. Out of thanks for her act of kindness, Jesus performed a miracle and left a painting-like imprint of his face on the veil. The legend contends that the veil has healing powers.

When we witness the suffering of an innocent animal and respond with an act of comfort and mercy we retain in our hearts an imprinted image of that suffering. When we allow the eyes of an abused animal to penetrate our heart and soul it is an image that will forever remain with us. This image of suffering can become a source of healing when we act out of love from an awareness of the *öthersí* painful struggle. Healing radiates as the lingering impact of an act that has touched the life of the victim. So here are two distinct but connected sources of healing. The first occurs when we reach out to the one who suffers with a tenderhearted gesture of comfort. This image becomes a kind of principle, which can continue to be a source of our motivation to exercise goodness toward every living creature. The more we attend to the image the more we become tenderhearted and empathic. So a single kind act becomes a perpetual source of healing for others. Our personal healing comes from allowing the tender mercies of God to daily fill our hearts and to be expressed through our lives. We thus carry within our very spirits a miraculous healing image.

Reflect upon some moment of animal suffering that you or someone else relieved through a comforting word, gesture or act of mercy. Reflect upon how that image remains within you and how you can nurture it to bring more healing and tenderness to the world.

"Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy."  
[New American Bible]

## **Seventh Station: Jesus Falls the Second Time.**

In watching videos, which depict the horrifying struggles of downers, it is never the first fall that completely rends my heart. What moves me to anguished tears is seeing the animal struggle to regain its feet and continue his desperate, futile attempts at escape. Oh, how I want to turn away from such horror. How I want to avert my eyes and forget such cruelty exists. For in the struggle to stand we see the desire to live, an expression of the love of life which God has placed in the very core of each and every living being. We see this desire to live with such profound clarity in these moments. "To live, to live, to live," it is a cry from the depths of the animal's soul which reaches across the species boundary and resonates within our own spirit. We know the self same desire to live is in ourselves. As Buddha said: "All beings tremble before violence. All fear death, all love life. See yourself in others." To see this yearning for life so vividly expressed in the midst of an inevitably tragic outcome is often more than we can bear. But I find comfort in the knowledge that the Spirit of God suffers with suffering creation. The Spirit is present to each creature; a creature that only exists because of God's sustaining love. The God of Jesus is the God of birds, elephants, chimpanzees and yes, downers. The God revealed through Jesus knows when every sparrow falls to the ground (Matt 6:26-29). And we can find comfort knowing the Creator Spirit is companioning each creature with a Divine Love that is the assurance of salvation and peace.

"The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down." [Psalm 145:14, NRSV]

## **Eighth Station - Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem**

"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." These women of Jerusalem are overwhelmed with grief as they watch the tortuous path Jesus is walking. They are beating their breasts and lamenting in a collective expression of their deep compassion for the present suffering of Jesus. They are like any mother who wants to see an end to the harm and violence being perpetrated upon their child. But Jesus points them away from his suffering to their own future suffering and to that of their own children. For the harm being done here is done, but the profound consequences of this terrible act are yet to be fully realized. Jesus knows that even a single act of injustice upon innocence results in a rippling effect through time and down through generations. There is great wisdom in the expression, "all things are connected". There is no such thing as an isolated incident.

Our wanton, careless destruction of sensitive ecosystems; our unending torrent of air and water pollution; our relentless development of rural lands and shorelines; in short our treating God's creation as a commodity to be bought, sold, plundered and exhausted is an act of theft from the people of the future. Our perpetual state of violence, anger and hatred only creates an unending spiral of violence, anger and hatred. All of these acts have lasting, perhaps even irreversible consequences for future generations. Jesus tells the women that their suffering may very well exceed his own. Think of how our actions today are denying the next generation the very creation God called "good". Later in this scripture Jesus will use natural imagery to further emphasize his message of the impact of evil acts against the good: "If they do these things in the green wood, what will happen in the dry." When those in power and those who blind themselves to the abuses of power treat peaceful innocence in this manner at this moment, what level of violence are they capable of in the future to the truly guilty. We must ask ourselves what possible good can come from the slaughter of millions upon millions of God's creatures who have walk the way of the cross every day of their short, wretched lives? What possible good can come from the ongoing destruction of natural areas? What possible good can come from continually fouling our water and air? Truly the children of the future may be in such desperation over the loss and degradation of God's creation that they "...will begin saying to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'"

Reflection: The Iroquois teach that we are to create a good world for our children seven generations into the future. What can each of us do this day to insure a good world for even the very next generation?