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Late one night, a woman reaches for a ringing telephone on her bedside table. A voice informs her that her son has been in an accident and that he's been brought to the emergency room. Later on, at the hospital, she learns that he was killed instantly.

A man sits in a doctor's waiting room, trying valiantly to read a magazine, but thinking instead about the mysterious "lump" the doctor has identified within his abdomen. As the door opens, he looks up. As soon as he sees the doctor's grim, unsmiling face, he doesn't need to hear what is inside the manila folder.

A teenager bounds down the stairs in response to her mother's call. Her father and mother, seated at opposite sides of the kitchen table, tell her they're sorry to have to tell her, but they're getting a divorce.

Suffering. We all wish life could be free of it, but the truth is, it's a rare life that knows little of heartache. "Human beings are born to trouble, just as sparks fly upward," says the book of Job.

It is one of the greatest philosophical problems of all time, this problem of suffering. "Why does God allow it?" the afflicted ask. "Doesn't the Lord hear my cries?"

Christianity, however, does have a distinctive answer to this question of suffering.

Jesus' answer is summed up in his statement from our reading today: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

That may not sound like much of an answer. The cross is, after all, an instrument of torture and death, a means of execution so harsh that its victims often took days to die of suffocation.

For prospective church members, cross-bearing is not what you'd call an enticing membership perk. As with many difficult sayings of the Bible, especially with this one, it helps to look at the larger context in which these words appear.

Not long before Jesus utters these words, he begins to tell his disciples of his impending death. Peter takes him aside and begins "to rebuke him." He says, "No way, Lord. That can't happen. You can't *let* that happen!"

Jesus' reply is stunning in its directness: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!"

Jesus will not be deterred from what he has to do. If Peter, his closest friend, will not journey with him, he will go it alone. Should Peter stand in his way, Jesus will place him behind him, where he can do no harm. It's only after these curt exchanges that Jesus gathers the whole body of his disciples together and lays on them this hard teaching about cross-bearing.

He wants his followers to have no illusions about what lies ahead in Jerusalem. The way of discipleship leads, inevitably, to a cross. The response of Christianity to the problem of human suffering is that even pain has a place --somewhere, somehow --in God's plan.

Suffering, in the Christian view, can actually be redemptive. The process of living through suffering, of taking up "the cross we have to bear" can, astoundingly, lead to new life. There can be no Easter without Good Friday. This is a startling, even original, teaching.

We are the faith that boldly hangs the image of an instrument of capital punishment in our worship places, and even around our necks, proclaiming to all the world that there is no experience in this life that God's love does not have the power to transform.

Our spiritual tradition charts a course not around suffering, but straight *through* it. "For those who want to save their life," Jesus says, "will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Along the road to Christian maturity, many of us come to discover that Christianity is more than a positive-thinking philosophy and that Christianity's God is far greater than a cosmic vending machine, whose sole purpose is to dispense answers to prayers as quickly as we can plunk in our quarters.

We discover, in other words, that God has better things to do than to hover around us like some compulsive maître d' trying to meet our every need.

When Peter rebukes Jesus, his horrified reaction is understandable. The vision of a suffering God is just too painful, too mind-bending. That's why so many more of us come to church on Easter than show up on Good Friday.

Yet, even for those who do manage to grapple with the idea of a crucified God, there is still the further challenge of taking up whatever crosses may come to us in this life.

For many, the ultimate spiritual trial is sparked not by anything spiritual at all, but by the relentlessly physical suffering of pain or illness. "I'm not really afraid to die," admits many an elderly person, on the way to the hospital. "What I fear most is pain."

Jesus is encouraging us not to flee that pain, should it come our way, but rather to confront it. He's challenging us to take it up and bear it, as he bore his own cross to Calvary. It's important to interject, here, that there are some forms of suffering, some crosses that ought never to be borne, not by anyone.

Domestic violence is one example. Some have tried to twist Jesus' words to justify a battered woman's remaining in a clearly abusive relationship, even at the risk of her life. "I suppose it's just the cross you have to bear," clucks the well-meaning friend, applying ointment to the bruises — with little idea of how much further pain those words can

cause. Similar words have been spoken, over the years, to members of racial minorities victimized by discrimination.

There are true crosses and there are false crosses — crosses that lead to the center, to Christ, and crosses that lead only to loneliness and desolation. Christ's call to carry the cross never means we must abandon our sense of justice.

The medieval spiritual writer Thomas à Kempis once said a profound thing about cross-bearing: "If you bear the cross gladly, it will bear you."

And so yes, every so often circumstances unfold in our lives that radically change us, so much so that we are never quite the same again, such as when you come through a life-threatening illness and not only recover, but find a new vitality and optimism for living. Call them turning points, conversions, new births, awakenings, spiritual resurrections, call them what you want but call them gifts from God. We are a species that has the ability to be transformed from one plane of existence to another higher level of being human; from one level of loving to another, from feeling little purpose to our lives to discovering God's higher purpose for us and others.

The challenge is not to succumb to what might best be called "ordinary-ness." The mystics' call it boredom. We might define this state as the "who gives a rip about anything?" syndrome. But when we are tempted to cash in faith's chips and walk away, remember that God is still transforming lives by the renewing of our minds. Dare to believe that God is not finished with us, not now, not ever!

The Lord is telling us that transformation ultimately only comes from the giving of our lives, taking up the cross and following him.

The losing of our lives for his sake is another way of saying that we release our way, our demands, and our self-centered thinking into God's hands.

When we are confronted by a genuine cross, if we seek to bear it in all humility and faith, then we discover that truly, the cross bears us. And in times of suffering and heartache, we discover that we are not alone.

The one who travels beside us, you see, knows all about cross-bearing. He offers strength we could never begin to muster. Such strength he gives us as a gift — a free, unmerited, unexpected gift of grace.

"The world breaks everyone," says Ernest Hemingway, "and afterward many are stronger at those broken places."

I don't wish a cross for you, or for me, or for anyone else, but should one come our way, may we discover the presence of the living Lord, the one who says to us not that he will lift all our burdens, but that he will give us the strength to face and carry them!