

The Passion and mental illness

By [Mary Button](#)

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The Passion is a tremendous drama. It is the story of the violent execution of a political dissident by an empire that routinely ignored the margins of society. Today, the symbols and patterns of the Passion story—the cross, the cloth used to wipe Jesus’s bloodied face, the garments stripped from his body, the nails hammered into his sides—are incorporated into a story we take on as our own.

For five years, I’ve been making art about the last day of Jesus’s life. Each of these Stations of the Cross projects has taken on a different social justice and advocacy issue. The first, in 2010, was created in the wake of the Haitian earthquake. Its 14 stations take Haitian artists’ images of Eden and incorporate them into paintings of Passion. [My second Stations series](#) explores the uprising in Syria. It follows the cataclysmic horror of the events as they unfolded, incorporating illustrations of the uprising with Jesus and the cross at the center of each.

In the 2013 [Stations of the Cross: The Struggle for LGBT Equality](#), I examine queer history through the lens of Martin Luther King Jr.’s observation that “the arc of the

moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The following summer I began teaching art at the Shelby County Jail in Memphis. This led to [*Stations of the Cross: Mass Incarceration*](#), which crafts a narrative about the legal, historical, and cultural structures that have made it possible for the United States to incarcerate 2.5 million people.

My latest Stations series, *Stations of the Cross: Mental Illness*, is in many ways the culmination of the four previous series. The immediate pull of the subject matter came from one of my incarcerated students. Like me, she struggles with bipolar disorder. Unlike me, all of her actions are scrutinized by her jailers, at the risk of further and indefinite imprisonment.

The theme of suicide runs through my past projects; here I take it on more explicitly for the first time. Other themes include trauma, the misuse of the law, and shattered relationships. It is perhaps my most personal and hopeful Stations series yet.

The narrative shape of the project comes from the artists and writers Kay Redfield Jamison profiles in *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. My depictions of the Passion are informed by the words of Robert Lowell, Virginia Woolf, Delmore Schwartz, and August Strindberg, each of whom struggled profoundly with mental illness. In the midst of this illness, they made dramatic leaps in their art. Jamison and others call this genius. As a Christian, I call it grace.

The experiences of people with mental illness have a lot to teach the church. This Lent, it is my hope that [the materials from this Stations project](#) will help faith communities have meaningful conversations about the challenges to wellness that people with mental illness experience.