

The body of Christ must have been a remarkably healthy body. It is hard to imagine a person who could heal the sick, give sight to the blind, open the ears of the deaf, make the lame walk and even raise the dead to life, as having anything less than a perfectly healthy body himself. In the gospels, we read about Jesus walking all around the lands of Galilee, the Decapolis, Judea, Samaria. The landscape of that part of the Middle East is quite hilly, so as Jesus walked around and did his ministry, he most certainly got a work-out. Almost everything he did would have required a physically fit body.

Yet, on the night of his betrayal, his health had already been exposed to stress even before the first of several trials.

When Jesus was praying in the garden, some ancient manuscripts of the gospel of Luke include these words: “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.”

It seems almost impossible that a person would be able to sweat blood. But an article released 22 years ago today, in the March 21, 1986, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* entitled “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” states that bloody sweat or hematidrosis may occur in highly emotional states.

Jesus was then arrested and brought to trial. Here is when the abuse of the body of Christ began. He was first taken before the Sanhedrin, and was found guilty of blasphemy. Mark’s gospel tells us how the guards blindfolded Jesus, spat on him, and struck him in the face with their fists, mocking him the entire time.

Since the Jewish leaders needed Roman permission for an execution, he was put on trial before Pilate, the Roman authority in the region. Before permission to crucify him was granted, Jesus was first scourged, or flogged.

In considering the suffering of the body of Jesus, it seems to me like it has only been within the past few years that there has been a renewed understanding of the suffering that Jesus went through when he was flogged. The account passes by so quickly when we are reading the gospel story: Tonight, in John chapter 19 verse 1, I read, “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.” But the ordeal of flogging wouldn’t have happened as quickly for Jesus.

Flogging was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution, and only women, Roman senators, and soldiers were exempt. The usual instrument used to flog someone was a short whip called a flagrum or a

flagellum with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls and nails or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals. The back, buttocks, and legs of a man were normally flogged by two soldiers called lictors. As the condemned was repeatedly struck, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and nails and sheep bones would cut into the skin and underlying tissues. This brutal attack would often leave the back of the accused as a mass of quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. And we think that the violence we see on television or in the movies is a modern-day invention. If only that were true.

Telling you what happens to a man when he is flogged wasn't told to offend you, but it helps us to meditate on our reading from Isaiah tonight. Isaiah writes, "by his stripes we are healed." Knowing what happens when Jesus was flogged helps us realize the severity of his stripes, those stripes on his back which lead to our healing.

Jesus was then mocked by the Roman soldiers. The body of Christ was subjected to further indignities. They placed a robe on his shoulders, and a crown of thorns on his head. My guess would be that they didn't do that very lovingly. They probably pulled that robe down on his shoulders, and rubbed it into his wounds. And they probably shoved that crown of thorns onto his head, not caring how hard it would dig into his scalp. And they spat on the body of Christ. And they struck him on the head with a reed they had placed in his hand, which was to serve as a mock scepter of a king.

Again, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, with the scourging, the pain, and significant blood loss, the body of Christ was probably already in a pre-shock state. Considering the lack of food, water, and sleep, he would have already been in a weakened state. Even before the crucifixion, the physical condition of Jesus was at the least serious, and quite possibly critical.

Next came the procession to the crucifixion site. He was forced to carry the cross bar of his own cross. Its weight would normally have been 75 to 100 pounds. John's gospel tells us that Jesus carries his cross by himself. The other gospels tell us that Simon of Cyrene was coerced into helping Jesus carry his cross.

Once they reached Golgotha, the body of Christ was then thrown to the ground, which either reopened the wounds of his flogging, or rubbed dirt into the wounds. His hands were then nailed to the cross beam. Evidence today shows us that most people, when they were crucified, had the nails driven through their

forearms or wrists, since this would ensure that the person wouldn't fall off the cross. But there would be times when those who did the crucifying would take liberties in how they would administer the punishment. Since John's gospel tells us that Jesus' hands were pierced, perhaps the executioner that day wanted to inflict even more humiliation on Jesus, so perhaps he put the nails in the palms of his hands instead. Either way, Jesus' arms were stretched wide open as the cross bar was then hoisted up onto the upright. And then his feet were nailed to the upright.

In this position the length of survival for victims of crucifixion might vary from a few hours up to several days. The process of crucifixion interferes with normal breathing. With the weight of the body hanging on the arms, it is necessary to lift the body with the legs to draw a breath. Each respiration requires an agonizing and tiring effort, which leads eventually to exhaustion and asphyxia. This, coupled with the loss of blood, finally led to death.

Even after his death, the body of Christ was subject to abuse. A spear was thrust into his side, piercing his lung and heart. Blood and water flowed from the wound.

On this Good Friday, we take the time to visualize vividly the things Christ suffering in his body—not to make ourselves feel more guilty, but that we might feel more grateful. He bore our sins in his body on the cross. But there is no need to feel guilty for that. After all, he did it voluntarily, for us. In John's Gospel, that's what Jesus comes to do. It's the plan, the entire time. As they would tell us during our first year of seminary, Jesus was never plan B. Jesus comes and suffers for us because God loves us so much. Jesus' death on the cross shows us just how far God is willing to go to get us turned back to God. God loves us through sin and death, so much so, that God will take on our sin and die with us and for us so that we never have to die alone. Are we to feel remorse that Jesus died a brutal death for us on the cross? No, rather, we are to feel gratitude and deep devotion.

The body of Christ lifted up on the cross draws all hearts to itself.

Finally, Joseph of Arimathea comes before Pilate, asks, and is given permission to take Jesus' lifeless body and prepare it for burial. The body of Christ is removed from the cross. Jesus is taken down from his throne, where it was announced to the world that he is "Jesus Christ, King of the Jews."

As John tells the story, we hear that Jesus' mother Mary stood by and watched as her son had died on

the cross. Parents who have grieved the death of their own children will understand how Mary's soul was pierced by a spear, too. Try as she might, her love could not make Jesus alive again. No amount of love from all of the people gathered around the body of Christ could reverse the reality of his death. Only the love and power of God could do that.

The body of Christ was carried to a carved rock tomb, wrapped in a linen shroud, laid-out on the cold stone slab, and sealed inside with a large stone.

The body of Christ, with all of its marvelous members and wonderful attributes, lay still! The feet of Christ...the hands of Christ...the mouth, the ears, the eyes of Christ....the heart and blood of Christ....the whole body of Christ....was dead!

The stillness of death, final and complete, was all that now surrounded the sacred body of Christ.

We are left tonight to contemplate the utter desolation of the apostles, the women, and the other followers of Jesus. For our faith to grow, we need to also experience their dejection as we wonder with them:

Why didn't Jesus save himself? Why should he let the finality of death destroy the love and the joy he so freely gave to all? Why was he always saying, 'The kingdom of God is at hand'?

And especially after considering the truly awful aspects of the crucifixion of his own body, why would he tell us, "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"?

There are many questions to ask, and many statements of Jesus to ponder. Perhaps, most of all, we should think about what he meant when he said something else about his body. What do you think Jesus meant, when he said, "Destroy *this* temple, and in three days, I will raise it up"?