

There are few things more powerful than the testimony of an eyewitness. I had a friend named Lee Soucy who was an eyewitness to one of the great events of the 20th century. He was on the battleship Utah in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Lee loved to tell the story of his experiences that day to friends, to family, to school children. Lee's first-person accounts always brought that historic day to life.

There are few things more powerful than the testimony of an eyewitness. That's why I love reading the Passion story as found in the Gospel according to St. John.

Now, all the Gospels contain eyewitness testimony. Mark is traditionally based on the recollections of St. Peter, as recorded by John Mark, who was perhaps an adolescent living in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion. In fact, Peter and Mark's eyewitness account is so compelling, that Matthew and Luke both use it as the skeleton for their Gospels.

But Mark is short. Mark is interested in "just the facts, ma'am." Mark is not a deep thinker. For deeper reflections, we have to turn to the Gospel according to St. John.

The core of John is based on the eyewitness testimony of the beloved disciple who witnessed many events in Jesus' life. But what makes the Gospel of John so special is that it takes this eyewitness testimony and combines it with about 60 years of theological reflection by the beloved disciple and the community, the church that grew up around him. The Gospel of John tells us of things that happened on the surface. But John also tells us over and over again that these things have deeper meaning.

Which brings us to today's account of the soldier piercing Jesus' side with a spear. On the surface this seems like a rather obscure and trivial story. Yet John puts a tremendous amount of emphasis on it. The question, of course, is why? So let's look at what John is trying to tell us.

We just heard these words: "Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews (*or more properly 'the Jewish leaders'*) did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him."

Now, you might wonder what all this leg breaking stuff is about.

Everyone raise your arms up in the air like this *{hold arms straight up}*.

Now, lower your head down to your chest like this.

Now try to breathe. This posture constricts your airway. It makes breathing more difficult. Now, stay in that position for the next 3 hours and imagine what that'll do to your diaphragm, the muscle you breathe with. It'll really tire it out, making it harder and harder to breathe.

Now, don't throw your shoulders out of socket. But I want you to have your arms up, and then push up with your arms as hard as you can. Feel what that does to your breathing. It makes it very difficult.

So when the Romans wanted to speed up death by crucifixion, they'd take an iron mallet and smash your legs. That would literally knock your legs out from under you. And if you'd been fighting to breathe for several hours, the sudden collapse of your legs would violently thrust your arms up relative to your body. That was usually enough to make you stop breathing. That's what's going on here.

So the soldiers break the legs of the two criminals on either side of Jesus. But then, John tells us that they realize that Jesus is already dead. No need to break his legs.

So, one of the soldiers pierces Jesus' side with a spear. This is not a big 8 foot long javelin. This is a little iron tipped stabbing spear about three-and-a-half feet long, that was standard issue for Roman infantrymen.

Most of the paintings show Jesus hanging on a tall cross 15 or 20' up in the air. But those paintings are inaccurate. Crosses were fairly short. Jesus' head was probably only a foot or two above the heads of the soldiers standing in front of him. It would be easy for one of the soldiers to walk up with a short three and a half foot spear and jab him in the side.

Nothing unusual about that. But John does record something unusual after the soldier pierces Jesus' side. He says, "at once blood and water came out."

Now this part is a little strange. Dead people usually don't bleed. And corpses don't leak water when you perforate them. In fact, there's no discrete vessel or reservoir of water inside the human body.

The forensic scientists say this: The spear probably pierced Jesus' heart. There's a sac around the heart called the pericardium. It doesn't contain water, but it does contain clear pericardial fluid. That's probably the source of the 'water.' And then after piercing the pericardium, the spear presumably penetrated one of the chambers of the heart, where there'd be a fair amount of blood. Even though corpses don't bleed, if the heart was pierced, some blood would ooze out, mingled with the pericardial fluid.

The beloved disciple would have witnessed this flow of blood and "water." In fact, the writer of the Gospel wants to make sure that we understand that this is something based on eyewitness testimony. The very next verse says, "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."

The message is clear. The beloved disciple witnessed Jesus' death in all of its gory and bloody reality, from the nails in his wrists to the spear in his side. And from Jesus' corpse, blood and water came out. That's part of the reality of Jesus' death.

But don't forget what the Gospel of John does. John takes eyewitness testimony and couples it with 6 decades of deep theological reflection. Blood and pericardial fluid oozing out of a spear wound is at many levels a trivial fact. But John goes to the trouble of writing it down and emphasizing it heavily. That's because it points to a deeper truth.

Water and blood have rich meaning in John's Gospel. The image of water is tied intimately to the life-giving Spirit that brings rebirth. Back in ch3 Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."¹

The image of blood is something that gives life to those who partake of it. In ch6 Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."²

Water and blood are sources of life in John. Don't miss the point. In a very graphic way, John is telling us that our life flows directly out of the death of Jesus Christ. Through the regeneration by water and the Spirit in Baptism, we share in Christ's death. And by partaking of his Body and Blood in Communion, we proclaim that death until he comes again.

Twin streams of water and blood flow from the actual body of the crucified Lord.

Twin streams of water and blood flow sacramentally from Christ's body, the church.

By believing that he died for us, we share in the benefits of his sacrificial death.

By partaking of his death through the sacraments, we share in his life.

He who saw this has testified, not so that you may know some interesting historical trivia.

"He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe."

And in believing, may we find life.

¹ Jn 3:5

² Jn 6:53