

Dare to have the vision this Easter season

Few things rivet our attention the way that death does! I spent this past Holy Week leading a men's retreat at St. Joseph's In The Hills in Malvern Pennsylvania. Several days before the retreat, on Good Friday, I felt strange feelings in the back of my right leg. The previous two times I had those feelings blood clots had developed. Early in 2008 the clot was dissolved through medication. Later in 2008, ironically while I was giving a men's retreat at Malvern, the blood clot moved to my lungs. I drove back to Baltimore that night and was admitted to St. Joseph's hospital and treated for a pulmonary embolism. As most of us know, such embolisms are often fatal.

So when I experienced similar symptoms, it felt right to get it checked out at Paoli General Hospital in Malvern.

Fortunately, the ultrasound indicated that there was no new clot.

However, as I lay on my gurney in the emergency room, many thoughts ran through my mind.

The first was the irony of the situation. Was I going to die on Good Friday? I've always believed in good liturgical observances, but this seemed as if I were carrying the observance far too far! On the other hand, spiritually, could there be a more fitting time to die?

Another thought that went through my mind was the stark contrast in the situation. Just hours before we had read again the dramatic and tragic story of Christ's crucifixion. Here was a good man being tortured to death. All around me, a lot of good medical personnel were trying to prevent the deaths of other people.

In those hours lying there waiting for test results, I felt how abandoned Christ was and how blessed I was.

And, yet, I realized that the best of medical care can only delay death. My death will

just be one more death in the history of human life. Christ's death would change history. In John's Gospel, being raised up on the cross is part of Christ's being ascended into heaven. In John's Gospel, Christ has the power. In death, his divinity will triumph over death.

Ironically, earlier in the retreat, during the question and answer period, one man had asked: "Where were all those people who cheered Jesus on Palm Sunday? Why were they not rallying around Jesus on Good Friday to prevent his death?"

I offered a very humble analogy. I asked him if he knew how many people showed up at the airport to welcome home the Indianapolis Colts when they lost the Super Bowl? Remember, thousands had cheered for them in person before the game. Millions no doubt supported them from a distance. In their triumphs and victories leading up to the Super Bowl, there were countless people cheering.

How many showed up when they came home from losing the Super Bowl? Eleven people greeted them at the airport! Everybody loves a winner. We love to be on the right side! Who wants to be with a loser?

Here's the further irony. Jesus didn't even get 11 people to stand by him. In John's Gospel only Mary and the beloved disciple are there. In the other Gospels the apostles have all headed for the hills! A few women watch from a distance.

As I lay on my padded 'cross' in that emergency room I had greater empathy than ever for the lonely figure hanging on that wooded cross earlier.

None of us can prevent our own deaths. We can, however, all choose our own life. Despite whatever flaws and failings may have been a part of our past life, can we in this Easter Season choose to stand with Mary when everyone else has abandoned the Lord? Can I, in fact, be the beloved disciple, willing to stay when all others leave? Can we dare to have the vision, that only faith can give, that this 'loser' is really the ultimate winner?