

Solitude and solace

A private room wasn't private enough.

Faced with the prospect of a fourth consecutive sleepless night, I shooed my wife and a good friend from my hospital room on the afternoon of Easter Monday and attempted to find some rest.

That was par for my course. Sharing a childhood bedroom with four older brothers is among the reasons I prefer solitude, be it with a keyboard, on a run or plopping my beach chair as far from others as possible.

Eyes shut in vain, my racing mind quickly concluded: What am I doing, by myself?

A Good Friday heart attack had led to the recommendation of open-heart surgery, a quadruple bypass to be performed two mornings after Easter. Scrutinizing a waiver requiring my signature, my eyes had lingered on a possible side effect: Death.

Solitude, be gone. Mary was summoned, to discuss weighty issues, specifically our faith, hope and love.

She scribbled as I recited my prayer routine, for sharing when my time does come. Its inspirations include the Gospel of Matthew, St. Francis of Assisi and a singer-songwriter from north Texas. Gratitude is plainly stated. Patience is alluded to, twice. Mary was charged with enforcing my request for no visitors to Union Memorial Hospital other than her and our son, Don - and twice the Holy Spirit deemed otherwise.

For years I've voiced a running alibi, that God withheld my patience to give a double dose to my younger sister, Sue. Twenty hours from surgery, I told Mary, "Man, I'd like to see her." With that, Sue's face popped around a curtain.

The day after surgery, relief was fogged in by post-op pain, which had me longing aloud for a "guy in a collar." On cue, in walked Father Jack Lombardi after a 100-mile drive from Hancock. It was like September 2015 again, when his presence and words, when necessary, regularly lessened my anxiety and blood pressure on our

weeklong walk to Philadelphia to see Pope Francis.

Mine was an unforgettable Easter season. Ospreys nesting on Sue Creek and a fox hopping a fence left me misty, as did certain song lyrics, the Boston Marathon and my umpteenth viewings of “Babe” the pig and Kurt Russell’s portrayal of Olympic ice hockey coach Herb Brooks in “Miracle.”

My gratitude is keener than ever. Patience remains elusive, particularly when I don’t ask for help.

Assistance is found in homilies. On successive Sunday mornings, my ears were open: first on the Feast of the Ascension, to Jesus’ message to the Apostles to shed their old ways and embrace a new reality; and then a week later to another of my parish priests, who paraphrased the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:16-25 to include patience.

That was on Pentecost, when Acts 2:1-11 describes “all filled with the Holy Spirit” and “we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.”

The previous day, Mary and I enjoyed an annual ritual, a Preakness party where some connections date to the 1960s. The anticipation peaked a few minutes before post-time, as two dozen people talked over one another, telling old stories about our salad days and new ones about our grandchildren. It was deafening, and delightful. I reclined in a corner of the living room, opened the voice memo app on my phone and preserved the ecstasy and love being shared.

I also got misty again.