

"WAITING FOR THE DOCTOR"

A Sermon By

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**Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

Doctors are so busy. And so many of them now-a-days seem to be running their offices like an assembly line. Perhaps you've noticed.

I read about a man recently who walked into a doctor's office and the receptionist asked him what he had. "Shingles" was his answer. And so she took down his name and address and medical insurance number and told him to have a seat. Fifteen minutes later a nurse's aide came out and asked him what he had. "Shingles" he again answered. She took down his weight and height and a brief medical history and told him to wait in the examining room. About a half-hour later a nurse came in and asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles". So she gave him a blood test, a blood pressure test, an EKG and told him to take his clothes off and to wait for the doctor. An hour later the doctor came in and asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles". The doctor said, "Where?" The man replied, "Outside in the truck...where do you want me to put 'em?"

Most of us admire our doctors. And if we have any complaint to voice it may have to do with the fact that sometimes they keep us waiting. As a matter of fact, according to the AMA, that's the leading complaint that people have about doctors. Yes, they can keep us waiting and this can be frustrating especially when we're not feeling well. And it's even worse when it has some thing to do with someone we love. NOW,

DEVELOPMENT

In today's Scripture Lesson, we find a family going through a crisis. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, are close personal friends of Jesus. Jesus had spent time in their home. He always made a point of stopping by to see them when He was passing through Bethany on His way up to Jerusalem. They had shared many enjoyable moments together.

Jesus was teaching one day when word came that Lazarus was critically ill. "Lord...He whom You love is ill". Certainly Jesus would come at once to the aid of His sick friend. He had healed other people. He would certainly want to heal His friend. But instead of going at once to Lazarus, Jesus proceeded to stay where He was for two more days. And what doesn't make sense is that Jesus was only two miles away. He could have been with Lazarus and his sisters in a matter of sixty minutes. Instead He purposely stayed where He was. Strange, isn't it...when you stop to think about it.

How would you feel if you or a loved one went to the Emergency Room and had to wait forty-eight hours for the doctor to show up? You'd be outraged. And if a loved one died while waiting two days for the doctor to show up, you would be more than outraged. You'd be calling your lawyer. Sue. Right?

However, we are given a clue that something extraordinary is about to take place for when Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, He says:

"This illness does not lead to death.
Rather it is for God's glory...."

And by the time that Jesus finally makes His way to the home of Martha and Mary, their brother Lazarus is dead. You can imagine how they must have felt.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Our lesson - our sermon today - is more than just a story about a family in crisis. It is about the crisis of a world that lives in sin and death. And the deeper purpose here is to reveal Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life. Let me share a story that will help to let some light shine in on this.

Mark Miller writes,

"In June of 1977, it seemed that everything was going my way. I had graduated from college, had married Shirley and was working in my family's honey business in southern California."

Mark and Shirley had big plans. First, Mark would enter Law School in the Fall and Shirley was expecting their first child. They were filled with great optimism. Later that Summer, something happened. Tragedy struck. One day while out jogging, he felt all the strength go out of his body. He recalls that he almost passed out. He made an appointment to see his doctor but the doctor could find nothing wrong with him. For the next two years Mark had just about every imaginable test run on him. But the results were always negative. And yet, he got sicker and sicker...no energy, often nauseous. "I literally thought I was dying" he said. During this time he and other family members began to lift him up in their prayers.

In January of 1979, his wife, Shirley, just happened to read about a hospital in Dallas that had an Environmental Control Unit. For six weeks Mark was tested and finally the doctors told him that he was suffering from a "break-down" in his immune system. Apparently he could not tolerate modern chemicals.

Things got worse as they moved from one place to another. It seemed that everything was making him sick - from cleansers to lawn fertilizers. Eventually he got so bad that he had to sleep in his car in the hills and by the Spring of 1980, he reached his lowest point. He wrote in his journal,

"Everything is hopeless. I want to die. Why must I suffer on and on and on....God, please - HELP ME."

His prayer was answered the next Summer. He said that,

"I felt myself lifted on eagles' wings. I seemed to soar beyond the fog and the clouds into the clear blue sky!"

He felt himself...healed! And he was now free to rejoin his family. His wife, Shirley told him, "I know now how Lazarus' family must have felt when he walked out of the tomb." Mark Miller is alive again after four long, hard difficult years. And he has given all of the credit for his new-found health to God! ***

BACK TO JESUS AND LAZARUS

But let's go back to Jesus and His disciples. They make their way to Bethany. When Martha hears that Jesus is approaching, she runs out to meet him and her first words are,

"Lord...if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

And Jesus quickly assures her, "Your brother will rise again". Martha thought

that Jesus here was referring to the "last day". But Jesus replies,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die."

And Jesus asks Martha if she believes this and Martha replies, "Yes, Lord I do, I do believe."

Martha hurrys home and tells her sister that "the Teacher is here and is calling for you." Mary also runs out of the house to meet Jesus. She kneels at His feet and repeats what her sister had said,

"Lord...if you had only been here my brother would not have died."

She is grieving uncontrollably. And the people who followed her out to meet Jesus also begin weeping. Jesus is deeply moved by all of this and begins to weep as well. The people see Jesus weeping and say, "See how He loved him." The crowd reacted sympathetically to Jesus, but had no understanding of who He really was. His tears were different from their tears.

The tears of Jesus were for the suffering of Lazarus and his family, AND also for the faithlessness that brings despair into the lives of people. He so desperately wanted them to know that peace that passes human understanding, that peace that comes from knowing and trusting in God, from knowing that He is the resurrection and the life. It's important that we see this.

Two years ago about now, the War in the Persian Gulf was coming to an end. At a Billy Graham Rally in Seattle, a woman by the name of Shirley Lansing told about the death of her son in Desert Storm. She led in to it this way, "I come with a story about my son, John Kendall Morgan, Warrant Officer One, United States Army, serving in Operation Desert Storm." She proceeded to tell the crowd that her son, Jack, had committed his life to Christ at an early age.

"At that time, she said, "It didn't seem terribly important, but it was. A few weeks ago, two officers came to our door...to inform us that our son, Jack, had been killed in action when his helicopter was shot down by hostile fire."

But the most moving moment of Shirley Lansing's witness came when she said,

"I speak to you only from my heart...only God can give me the strength to stand here before you and say these words. But they're so important. Each of you has the decision to make which my son made. And this is the time when you have a choice and we never know how long we will have to make that decision."

Three weeks before John Morgan was killed in action, half a world from home, from where his mother was speaking that night, he wrote two letters to his family...as he said, "just in case". Shirley and her family gathered together and read the letters after they received word of his death. John's words reassured his family, those beautiful words about "resurrection and the life". He ended his second, "just in case" letter with these words,

"In case you have to open this...please don't worry. I am all right. Now I know something you don't know.... what heaven's like!"

A POWER GREATER THAN THE POWER OF DEATH

I think that Jesus here was trying to help Martha and Mary

to see...and to realize that there is a power far greater than the power of death. It is the power of God, in Christ, at work in our lives and in the life of the world. Back to our text.

Standing there in front of the tomb, Jesus tells the crowd, "Take away the stone" - the stone that blocks the opening to the tomb. But Martha protests, "Lord...already there is a stench because he has been dead four days!" And Jesus reminds her,

"Did I not tell you, Martha, that if you believed, you would see the glory of God".

They remove the stone. Jesus looks up to heaven and prays and then cries out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus walks out of the tomb with his "hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in cloth". Jesus wanted them to know and He wants us to know that "yes" He has power over death. "I am the resurrection and the life". How many times across the years I have led in to a funeral service, a memorial service with those lifting words. And what comfort they bring to us. Yes, Lord...I believe! Help my unbelief.

Professional golfer Lee Trevino you may recall was struck by lightning while he was playing a golf tournament a few years back. I clipped what he said in describing the experience and share it with you.

"When I got killed by lightning I realized the 'passage' from life is a tremendous pleasure."

He explains it like this. He was sitting under a tree when the lightning hit.

"It bolted my arms and legs out stiff, jerked me off the ground and killed me. I knew I was dead. There was no pain. Everything turned a warm, gentle orange color. I saw 'mom' who had been dead for years. I saw other people from my life. It was a newsreel like you read about - my life passing before my eyes. But it was so pleasant, so wonderful. I felt great! I thought, 'boy...this dying is really fun' It was when I woke up in the hospital badly burned and in pain that I knew I had come back to life again for some reason". But Lee Trevino added..."There's no reason to fear death."

And that's the message that Jesus is trying to get across to all of us - golfers and non-golfers. We no longer fear death. The new life that Jesus gave Lazarus that day long ago was only temporary. He would one day die again. Still, he need not be afraid. For he has a friend who has conquered death. Perhaps there is some one person sitting in the congregation this morning who needs to hear this...perhaps more than one...to hear this "lifting word". Yes, what a friend..

CLOSING STORY

Dr. Don Webb, president emeritus of Centenary College, was born in Wales and served in the British Navy before coming

to this country to begin his ministry. He was always very proud of the fact that he had once served as captain of the HMS Switha (the name of his ship). He tells us how he wanted to impress his crew with how wise and how brave he was and their first assignment was to check the anchors that held the buoys in place and the only way to do this was to send down a deep sea diver.

He was told that the previous captain always liked to go down first. The only problem was that Don Webb had never done any deep sea diving and didn't know the first thing about it. He was unable to admit his inadequacy and any fear that he might have to the crew and to ask for help. He told his crew,

"Of course, I want to go down first...I wouldn't have it any other way...help me get ready..."

He was actually scared to death as he put on the heavy suit, the thick gloves, the leaded shoes and the helmet. He jumped overboard and slowly sank to the ocean floor. On the ocean floor he realized that he did not know how to walk. He panicked and fell forward, face down in the mud and worst of all, he let go of the life line. He remembered what the men had said,

"Whatever you do, Cap'n...don't let go of this.
If you need any help...just give her a tug!"

There he was, lying on the ocean floor....stuck...unable to move and he thought to himself, "This is it....this is how it all ends!"

After several minutes which must have seemed like an eternity, Don Webb felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. The crew had sensed that he had lost his life-line and was in serious trouble. An experienced diver came down to save him...to pick him up, to unstick him from the mud, to give back his life, to show him how to walk and how to survive.

And in much the same way, I believe that Jesus has acted in our behalf. Yes, He is the resurrection and the life. And friend, we no longer fear death, for we have a Friend who has come down and rescued all who believe and who want to believe - rescued them from the muck and the grime of this life, from sin and selfishness...and yes - even from the grave. So, that's the take home message for this February Sunday.

"I am the resurrection and the life. And he who believes in Me, though he were dead...yet shall he live. And whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die...."

LET US PRAY

Yes, Lord - we believe. Help our unbelief. And lead us to that "abundant life" in You. For in You we see life's highest hope and in You we experience life's deepest meaning. Melt us. Mold us. Fill us. Use us. O spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 21, 1993

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors who have joined us in worship here this morning. Pleased you're here...hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you...Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out, sign one of...Come, worship with us....come, work with us...
- B. Doing the Lord's work at this busy corner...fourth building out of which this congregation...three weeks from today we shall pause and celebrate our 156th birthday. Minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...members, wear..

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are highlighted for you in the bulletin. Review it on your own, noting the spiritual growth and study opportunities: "Hounds" on Tuesday. Aldersgate Class on Wednesday. Both study groups are beginning new books...good time to join.
- B. Please note that we're having a special coffee hour upstairs on third floor for parents and children...Sunday School. Regular coffee hour downstairs in the Russell Room. First time to do this...two coffee hours and we hope it works. Reason: to get the mothers and dads of our Sunday School children acquainted with each other....good idea.
- C. Outreach Committee meets on Tuesday evening, 7:30, Russell Room under Richmond Bates' steady leadership.

LENT BEGINS

- A. Lent begins this Wednesday. Ash Wednesday. Those lifting words of Phillips Brooks, Boston clergyperson of 100 years ago and the composer of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" always come to my mind:

"My friend, Lent is here! There is no magic in its days...it is only that we have resolved till Easter to give more time and thought to our religious life. All this may come to much, or it may come to nothing. I beg of you - let it come to much!"

- B. Communion will be offered on Ash Wednesday...on an individual basis...from 7:30 to 9:30 in the morning...on your way to work. Evening...4:30 to 6:30...on your way home. Come in here to the sanctuary...spend a few moments in the pews and then come forward...when you're read...and I shall be here in the chancel.

- C. Be sure to pick up your copy of The Sanctuary - 100 copies ordered...a reading for each day of Lent. Take on something extra during these 40 days...read something with a spiritual or religious theme...give up something for Lent. If you aren't sure just what to do...give me a call and I'll listen to where you are and respond to the "probings" of your spirit.

- D. "I beg of you...." let these days come to much! Get "in" to Lent. Join the Adult Bible Class. "Go 7 for 7"...every Sunday in church from next Sunday through Easter. Bring a friend to church with you.

OFFERING:

- A. Jesus said,

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering!

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PASTORAL PRAYER: February 21, 1993

Help us, Lord, in these moments of prayer to forget the style of our dress, our plans for this afternoon and this evening, the lust of the loneliness of a Saturday night in the city...and any momentary affliction that would make us more conscious of self than Thee - to the end that we may pray with singleness of mind and from the very depths of our being.

God, Our Father, we thank Thee, for all that keeps us believing that our years on earth do have meaning -

That a knowing, caring, guiding hand is at the helm.
That the resounding fury of the nations is not the final sound.

That love does endure....even when the tongues have ceased, and human prophecies have failed.

For ages past and for ages still to come, we thank Thee.

For the WISDOM of Scripture,
the means of Grace,
the sustaining bonds of fellowship within this parish,

For the faith in which we stand.

For the hope that springs eternal from the heart of the universe and fills us with hope, with courage, with patience....

For such as Thee, we thank Thee.

Our names and our needs are known to thee, Lord, even before we come to Thee. Behind our Sunday clothes and manners lie some unruly kingdom of fierce ambition, shameful pride, lusty passion, hurtful prejudice, deceitful words that we hope and pray will never see the light of day.

Some of us are LOW, and we need that lifting word;
Some of us are HIGH, and need to be deflated;
Some of us are ANGRY with the world and nation;
Some of us are not angry enough.
Some of us are CERTAIN about too much;
Some certain about too little.

Give to each of us an EYE for beauty, an EAR for truth, a HEART that is responsive to human need...a need that starts on the doorstep of this church and goes on and on. Move in our hearts this hour, O God. Melt us. Mold us for an adventure of giving with Christ. Disturb us as well as comfort us.

For we offer our prayers in deep faith, total trust, aware that Thou art just, loving and merciful in all thy ways with us. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.

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