Dear Friends in Christ,

There’s an old saying that is applied to people who are habitually late or chronically tardy and it goes like this: He’s so late he’d probably be late for his own funeral. Ever hear that before? Has anyone ever said that about you?

This is from the March 25, 2011 USA TODAY:

True to the sense of humor and flair that defined her life, Elizabeth Taylor knew exactly how she wanted her final starring role to play out. Her publicist tells Lifeline Live in a statement that Taylor wanted to be late for her own funeral:

The service was scheduled to begin at 2 pm but at Miss Taylor’s request started late. Miss Taylor had left instructions that it was to begin at least 15 minutes later than publicly scheduled, with the announcement, “She even wanted to be late for her own funeral.”

Oh my, and these are the people we idolize and emulate.

In our account from Scripture today we hear about a time when Jesus was late, not only late for a funeral but late for the burial as well, the funeral and burial of his good friend Lazarus of Bethany.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus, a brother and his two sisters, lived in Bethany, a small village just east of the city of Jerusalem. It was a family that was especially dear to Jesus. There are a number of times when the sisters of this family, Mary and Martha, are mentioned in the Gospels. On this occasion, the brother, Lazarus, was taken ill. We have no details, but the illness frightened his two sisters so much that they sent word to Jesus. Their message said, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” Obviously they thought that Jesus would interrupt his travels, discontinue his teaching, make a hasty trip to Bethany and heal Lazarus. Jesus, however, seemed almost indifferent to their message. In verses 4 through 6 of John 11 we read:

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it. 5 Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

By the time Jesus and his disciples came to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. When Jesus finally arrived, Martha was the first to meet him. She was probably the oldest of the siblings and she seems to have been the head of the household. Her first words to Jesus were these: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” There was no polite greeting, no “Shalom,” no “I’m so glad you’ve come”; just this: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

In one sense, Martha’s greeting was a stirring testimony of faith. She believed that Jesus would have made a difference. He who had opened blind eyes and restored crippled limbs could surely have taken care of her brother’s illness. But her statement was also a complaint; in fact it was an accusation. Quite clearly, Martha was saying, “What kept you so long? If you had hurried a bit or had left some of your other pressing business, you could have spared us the loss of our dear brother.” In other words, Martha was telling Jesus, “You’re late. It’s nice of you to have come, but you’re late.” If Jesus had come ‘on time’ according to Martha’s schedule, her brother would still be alive.

Jesus didn’t rebuke Martha for complaining nor did he defend himself. He simply listened to her frustration. And then he said, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha thought that Jesus was consoling her with the kind of
statements believers make to each other in the face of death, statements like “he’s in a better place,” or “he’s free of suffering now,” or “you will see him again.” Verse 24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” The doctrine of the resurrection of the body was clear to her. “Of course he will rise again...we all will rise from the dead on Judgment Day.”

But Jesus meant much more. He said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” He tells her, “I am the source of life. There is no life apart from me. Everlasting life is found in no one else. And I am the source of resurrection. Even those who die physically will rise again to everlasting life. How clearly Jesus explained the facts of life and death to Martha! He tells her, “Whoever believes in me, even though death makes its unwelcome earthly visit, will live. Whoever lives by faith in me will never die. The life of a believer survives death and the grave. (You don’t cease to exist when you die.) Physical death does not separate a believer from God. Believers are alive with God forever and will, on Judgment day, be restored body and soul to enjoy the glories of heaven. Death is no obstacle to the resurrection.”

Martha was upset because Jesus was late — as she saw it — late for a medical healing. She didn’t know that Jesus was right on time for a miracle. Four days late but still on time, Jesus walked with Martha and Mary and a great crowd of mourners to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. When they reached the tomb Jesus asked them to roll away the stone that closed the tomb, and Martha objected. By this time her brother’s body had begun to decay and the stench of death would be hideous. But Jesus insisted, and those who were present became witnesses to one of the greatest miracles of all, the return to life of a person who had been dead for four days.

Being four days late was not a random choice for Jesus. In their distorted beliefs, the rabbinic thought of this time was that the soul of someone who died hovered over the body for three days and then departed by the fourth day when decomposition became noticeable. Dead for four days meant “really dead,” “impossibly dead,” “dead beyond the point of no return.”

But nothing is impossible for God. Jesus looked heavenward and thanked his heavenly father for listening to him. He did this to turn the thoughts of the onlookers heavenward. Jesus then spoke, not for the benefit of God the Father, but for the benefit of those who were there. People had questioned whether Jesus was really sent from the Father as he had said. They doubted that he was the promised Messiah. They wondered how he could call God his Father. So now they only had to hear him call to the Father and see the following miracle to know that Jesus’ claims were true.

Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Good thing Jesus qualified this command with the name Lazarus. Imagine the parade of bodies if he had merely said, “Come out!

It is in death that God does his greatest work. It is in facing death that Jesus was triumphant over death. The raising of Lazarus was merely the preliminary event. As Jesus had said earlier, verse 4, “This...is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” It was a chance for the people to give glory to God, before Jesus himself faced death and conquered it. But the raising of Lazarus became a significant event, a pivotal point in the ministry of Jesus. We read further in John 11 that the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, to discuss this event. As a result of this miracle, they condemned Jesus to death and from this point on, they plotted to take his life.

It is in death that God does his greatest work. Not too long after the raising of Lazarus Jesus faced his own execution. By his death on the cross Jesus became the atoning sacrifice for sin. The Lamb of God gave his life to take away the sins of the world. Through death Jesus paid the penalty for your sin and freed you from the punishment your sins have earned, an eternity in hell. As a result of Jesus’ death, and through faith in him, death is no longer something that can bind you or destroy you. For believers in Jesus, death becomes the entry
point into eternal life. God is not bound by death and neither are you the believer in Jesus Christ. But for others, for unbelievers, it is different. Apart from faith in Christ, the fear of death brings hopelessness and despair.

It is in death that God does his greatest work. Just as you have been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life when you came to faith, so also will you be brought through physical death to eternal life. Central to our faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Central, also, is your death and resurrection. You don’t need any proof that death will come your way sooner or later. The proof is all around you. The extra flowers in the chancel today are from yesterday’s funeral. Yes, the proof of death is all around you. In Jesus you have proof that your resurrection is just as certain as your death. And on the day of resurrection there will be no qualifying names prefacing Christ’s call from the grave. John 5:28 “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. . . Everybody who has ever lived will then respond to Jesus’ call from the grave...no exceptions on Judgment Day.

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany four days late, the family of Lazarus was long past having hope. Lazarus was already dead, buried and his grave was sealed. It is important for you to realize that your seemingly hard or impossible circumstances are no problem to God. His power transcends your trouble, no matter what it may be. His power is not limited by your doubt or your hopelessness. Jesus has resurrection power and he cannot only bring victory when you haven’t given up hope. He is just as able to bring you the victory long after you’ve given up hope.

When it seems like your financial situation has died and the stink is beginning to arise; when it seems that your health is completely gone and the doctors have given up on you; when it seems that God has waited too long and the stench of doubt, distrust, and hopelessness rises; that’s when Jesus is ready to show forth his power and glory in you. Isaiah 55:8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, the family of Lazarus was long past having hope. Lazarus was already dead, buried and his grave was sealed. The Devil’s greatest lie that he whispers in the ear of everyone in distress is that “it’s over and there is nothing that God can or will do about it now.” If he can get you to give up on God, then he has accomplished his goal. Perhaps it seems as if your fervent prayers are never answered. Maybe you’ve been in financial distress for a long time. Perhaps your family has been in turmoil for years. Maybe you’ve been battling a health issue for a long, long time and it seems that God has turned a deaf ear to your cry. He’s late bringing help. He’s late bringing you a cure. He’s late providing a way our. He’s late answering your prayers. He’s late helping your loved one. He’s late and now things have gone from very bad to much worse and now there is no visible way to make things right.

Satan would like nothing better than to wrap you up in doubt and fear. To blind your thinking with lies and half truths, to bind your hands and feet with hurt feelings and self-pity, to roll a stone of doubt across the door to your heart and convince you that your attitude, your heart and your life stink to God, your life is hopeless so it’s time to give up and walk away.

Why does Jesus wait so long before he comes to rescue? Why is he so late? Why is his timetable so different from ours? Jesus wants you to know that it’s only when he speaks the word of deliverance that the victory will come and not until then. It will come in his time and in his manner. If God can raise the dead of four days, is there anything he can’t do? Is there any problem, situation or circumstance that God cannot redeem (in a sense, resurrect from a seemingly hopeless situation)? The answer to that question is ... No. There is no circumstance where God is defeated. The solution may not be what you expect and it may not necessarily be your first choice. But be very sure of this, God is ready and able to bring help into your life, regardless of the timetable. You can count on God’s schedule. God may seem, by your thinking, to be late, but God isn’t done yet. He’s right on time.
Let us pray:

Gracious Savior Christ Jesus,

While you were here among us you not only showed your power over death, you defeated death so that now it is for us merely the entry point into eternal life. We give you thanks for the knowledge that through faith we will live even though we die. While we remain on earth give us the patience and the trust to believe that your response to our needs is never late, but always on time.

In your name we pray. Amen.