*G.O.D.*

Psalm 91:1,2; 9-16

Luke 24:

April 26, 2020

So, where does God live? Would you believe me if I said, “Kearny, New Jersey?”

 That’s what you might think if you drove by a certain trucking terminal in that city – until 2004, at least, when the company ceased operations. On the side of its building was a huge sign that said: “Welcome to the home of G.O.D.”

 It wasn’t the God you’re thinking of. The company’s name was Guaranteed Overnight Delivery. “G.O.D.;” was its playfully blasphemous acronym. The company had it painted on the side of its trucks in huge letters. It also displayed G.O.D. on the trucks’ mud flaps. For years, those tractor-trailer trucks caused drivers throughout the Northeast, and even beyond, to do double-takes.

“Does God deliver?” some motorists asked themselves in astonishment as a G.O.D. truck roared past.

 Ask that question of the writer of Psalm 91, and the answer you’ll get back is: “Well, yes.” But not anything you can load on a shipping pallet. “Those who love me, I will deliver,” says the Lord (v. 14).

Fulfillment is a big deal in the world of business – particularly online retail. Matter of fact, I think that all those big warehouse buildings that line I 65 here in Greenwood are called “Fulfillment Centers.” It’s a major business in Greenwood.

“Fulfillment” is another word for “delivery.” It matters little if the online ordering experience is smooth and seamless. Much as the task of ordering online with all those windows calling for your personal information, and then ‘continue’ and ‘continue’ some more--much as all that is sometimes aggravating, ease of ordering is of little consequence if the product fails to arrive on time, as promised.

“Fulfillment” is an odd word to use in this regard. Yes, retail orders need to be fulfilled. Of course, customers must be satisfied, or the company will not remain in business for long. Carrying a cardboard box in from the front porch may produce the tiniest tingle of acquisitive excitement, but it is as nothing compared to the larger goal of spiritual fulfillment we all seek in life.

That, *only God can deliver*.

When the psalmist—speaking for the Lord—says, “Those who love me, I will deliver,” it becomes clear what it means to say that God is in the delivery business. What God delivers—or, better, who God delivers—is not merchandise. It’s people:

Verse 12: “For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

The psalmist’s focus here is not delivery *to*, but delivery *from* – delivery from *suffering*. Sounds pretty unambiguous, doesn’t it? Believe in God and God will keep you safe. *Quid pro quo*. Such a promise has HUGE appeal. Especially with coronavirus breathing at your door, and financial and social structures ripping apart at the seams as we try to keep people—even ourselves—alive.

Interestingly, this psalm is the basis for one of the temptations of Jesus. Its words are quoted by none other than Satan, according to the Gospel of Luke, ch. 4. You may have recognized it, right?

‘Jump from this pinnacle of the Temple. God will deliver you, Jesus. It says in God’s Word, right there in Psalm 91,

He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’

But Jesus rejects Satan’s offer of protection—an offer which amounts to something very close to comic-book superhero stuff. Our Lord wants none of that. He casts all that aside. Our Saviour chooses instead the painful walk of shame and the physical imposition of excruciating pain up on Calvary’s hill.

No doubt He believes God’s promise recorded in Psalm 91 which says, “Those who love me I will deliver.” And we would like to cling to that, too. We’re desperate that it be true. But God didn’t spare Jesus from suffering. God did, however, bring Him through the suffering and out the other side, to resurrection.

When we’re up against it, we want a SAVING. So did the two minor character disciples along the Emmaus road. And incidentally, maybe because they are unnamed, they take on our names, huh? They are us. I think Bible stories work that way.

The Emmaus Road story might remind us of where we began: the grand announcement of the Messiah’s birth is delivered to – wait for it – a few anonymous shepherds up in hill country. For Luke, the good news of the Gospel comes first of all not to insiders, but to ordinary folk in “forgotten,” over looked places. (Archaeologists don’t even know where Emmaus was actually located.) And as for people, maybe you and I feel forgotten, overlooked, just a part of the anonymous crowd. But as He did when He was born, when Jesus rises and returns, He arrives from outside in.

So let’s retell the story. It’s Easter afternoon. In this story, the first surprise, and we’ve mentioned this, is that Jesus appears not in Jerusalem, but on a minor road to an obscure village.

The second surprise is that He appears not to Peter, James, or John, nor to Mary or Joanna, but rather to two minor characters in the story. We’ve also noted that.

But the third is the greatest surprise of all: though these two followers of Jesus originally staked their lives on the idea that He was the Messiah, the one to redeem Israel;” and though they’re heartbroken to have those hopes dashed; and though they’ve spent many months, perhaps years, walking with Jesus and listening to Him along roads just like this one—still they don‘t recognize Him. He’s there, talking with them, walking beside them – and they don’t realize it’s Him.

Why not? One possibility is that their eyes are veiled with tears; they’re overcome with sorrow about having seen their friend and teacher die, as well as sorrow from disappointment that He turned out to be someone different than they’d hoped for. Perhaps their sadness and anxiety have turned them inward, away from the world, in self-absorption. Could this be happening to us? Maybe a little bit? They’ve lowered the shades, we might say, from within their house of sorrow. Jesus is right there, standing outside, but they’re not looking.

Another possibility is that somehow Jesus is *different*, that resurrection doesn’t mean mere “resuscitation,” that the risen Jesus is in some way transformed. The story suggests that the risen Jesus looks different, sounds different, even teaches in a different way. Cleopas calls Him a “Stranger.”

Does Jesus, would Jesus, sound or look or teach differently through ears and eyes that have been changed by sorrow, and fear, and anxiety, or pain? Would resurrection—living through, and beyond, and changed by death at your door and by what was once comfortable now being all unsettled . . . (would resurrection) change a point of view, maybe even to unrecognizableness? It might.

These followers are, as Jesus puts it, “slow of heart”; they don’t yet understand what Jesus calls the “necessary” choreography of redemption, in which the Messiah moves through and beyond the forces of death, of swirling pandemic, rising to new life, and freeing them and all of creation, incidentally, thereby inaugurating a new age of Jubilee.

The thing that stirs me about this story is how they realized later that this really was Jesus alongside them. Their hearts were burning as he reminded them and explained to them the scriptures.

The book is alive. It has the soul of our life, whispering to us of great well-springs of truth and hope and love. It speaks to us of our Saviour and of God as if our spirit were brushed by angels’ wings.

The Emmaus road followers were afraid and confused. The hope of their world had folded up around them. They didn’t recognize Jesus Christ as their Saviour. But I know that they, as you and I do, too, they wanted God’s eternity to surround and deliver their human frailty.

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,*

 *who abide in the shadow of the*

 *Almighty*

*Will say to the Lord, My refuge and my*

 *fortress*

*For He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler*

 *and from the deadly pestilence.*

You know, we can’t count on this, like a magical amulet that will, in all cases, and in the face of all illness or pain, protect us forever at every point.

However, I think we can be confident that in our times of trouble, when they come, that God is a God of love, nurture and care at all times. Those who believe, who take shelter in the arms of their God can be sure that Jesus IS RISEN—just maybe not in the ways we expected.

 A New Exodus, a Great Jubilee has dawned, but the risen Messiah doesn’t appear to important people in important places. Jesus shows up well outside the great city, on dust roads in now-forgotten villages, alongside minor players in the story—one of which Luke doesn’t even bother to name. Is it you?

Eastertide is a season of looking for the risen Jesus, and if we’re looking, we’d best be keeping our eyes open in the places we’d least expect to find Him.

In times of trouble, sickness, health, sadness and vibrancy you and I have a God who walks with us, who weeps and exudes with us, in a deep, continuing, reliable love.

Amen.