

My friend David Borger German, pastor of Sanctuary Church in Iowa City likes to talk about faith as a feeling. A helpful perspective, especially if you, like me, heard the 1980's mantra "Put your faith in the facts and the feelings will follow." As if faith is some purely rational function superior to feelings. We now know all the data streaming into our brain through our senses (things we hear, see, touch, smell, taste) goes first through the feeling part of the brain, then, a micro-millisecond later, enters thinking part. That means virtually every thought, or train of thought, is preceded by a feeling. Besides, a better translation for the word "faith" in the Newer Testament is "trust" and trust, as we all know is very much connected to feelings. And while we do need to learn to modulate our feelings and occasionally override our feelings, they are not our enemy and we need to listen to them, take them into account.

All to say, our feelings around the resurrection of Jesus really do matter and are worth paying attention to. Before there were any creeds, before there were any dogmatic statements about the resurrection defining institutional belonging, or what constitutes heresy and all that fear driven approach to religion, we have these dozen or so stories. And stories convey powerful feelings—or else they are forgotten. Feelings first, faith follows.

In these accounts, the reader or listener enters an emotion cloud with four common elements on the part of the people Jesus is appearing to: 1. Confusion in the form of extreme uncertainty: *What's happening here?* 2 Cognitive Dissonance (a particular form of confusion when unexpected things occur, beyond the expectations wiring our brain to date) 3. Wonder (sometimes laced with skepticism). It's quite an invigorating mix. But there's one other feature to these accounts: After death, the Jesus who appears retains his very distinct, his very human, his very compelling and charming human personality. If there's a difference in his personality after death, it's that he is more relaxed, more playful.

As Exhibit A I present to you, John 21, in the new Sarah Ruden translation—the first solo translation by a woman, and one that runs circles around previous translation efforts because Sarah Ruden is arguably more qualified to translate the common/street-Greek of the gospels than the vast majority of other translators who are not schooled, as she

is, in the popular Greek writings of that period. They haven't translated, like she has, many of these writings into English. Of course, the first woman to break the glass ceiling of Scripture translation (at least in the solo translator category) would have to be maybe two or three times better than her male counterparts. Nothing new there. Patriarchy—the rule of men excluding the rule of women—has deprived us all of so much talent. And because of her expertise in this ancient language—common Greek—Ruden is especially well attuned to the subtleties of emotion that make all the difference in stories and in human interactions in general.

I'll read and comment as we go along to draw out the subtleties, the humor, the human personalities, the feelings that precede faith, here.

After these things, Jesus revealed himself again to these students at the Sea of Tiberias [Israel's biggest inland lake, 13 miles long, surrounded by the hills of Galilee and the Golan Heights, captured from Syria in 1967] **and this is how he revealed himself.** [We get to reveal ourselves to others as we choose—Jesus gets to reveal himself to others] **There together were Simon Peter and Thomas, who was called the Twin, and Nathaniel from Kana in Galilaeae, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of Jesus' students.** We just note: These were 7 high-feeling young men. Peter wore his emotions on his sleeve, and at this point he's not yet over his self-loathing for denying Jesus three times on the eve of crucifixion, some weeks ago. We know Thomas was also in a funk—only he and Judas were not with the 12 on the first Easter night, when Jesus appeared briefly to the others. Nathaniel is the guy at the beginning of John's gospel hearing about Jesus from Nazareth, who scoffs, "Can anything good come from Nazareth" and Jesus overhears this and teases him about it when they first meet; the sons of Zebedee are also known as "sons of thunder" because they were hot heads; and two unnamed others, perhaps not among the inner circle 12 disciples.

And Simon Petros said to them, "I'm going off to fish." It's now some days, maybe weeks after the crucifixion and the first appearances. At least a group of them have gone home to the North where they grew up, from Jerusalem where the big events happened. Peter's betrayal is the elephant in the room—his failure as the student-leader of the students. He's gone back to his old Pre-Jesus routines. Remember he left his fishing business to follow Jesus, now he's back at it. He probably has lost all confidence all sense of his place in whatever is happening now, since these occasional

and mysterious and mostly short-lived appearances began. And it feels like he needs some alone time. *“I’m going off to fish. They told him, “We’re coming with you.”* Maybe they know in this state of mind it’s not good for this guy to be alone on a boat. ***Then they went and boarded the boat, but during that night they caught nothing.*** [A boat big enough to hold about 7 men was in the lakebed of the Sea of Tiberias some years ago; carbon-dated to roughly this period; I saw it, restored in a kibbutz and displayed.]

What feelings does this scene evoke? Peter saying, “I’m going off fishing.” They say, “We’re coming with you!” They are out all night, catch nothing. I’m getting a feeling of lethargy, aimlessness, lack of clear purpose—I learned this word watching Netflix Formula 1 from the Renault team, ennui.

But soon after dawn arose, Jesus stood on the shore. A shift in emotional energy, no? These are resurrection word-plays—the word translated resurrection is literally arose, as in stood up from the dead. *But soon after dawn arose, Jesus stood on the shore; the students, however, didn’t recognize that it was Jesus.* [This is a weird recurring thing in the early post-Easter appearances of Jesus—at least three times people who knew him well do not recognize him when he appears. Maybe because they don’t expect to see him—their brain is not used to people after death showing themselves like this, so vividly. Or, maybe because Jesus appeared wearing the common sun-gear of the day, a big hood covering the head and the upper part of the face—the Ray-Ban hoodie.

And now the Sarah Ruden pay-off: *However, they didn’t recognize it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, “You didn’t have anything to nibble, youngsters?”* Ruden knows this is a very particular Greek word that refers to something like a relish: a cooked dish, a side dish, not a main course, and one that often features fish. Like Gefilte fish—served as an appetizer in Jewish cuisine. Ruden says this word could be translated “little eatables” which reminds me of the things you pack for kids’ lunches—Lunchables with juice box, are those still a thing? A little something.

Ruden thinks Jesus is being playful with them here, maybe even a little prankish. We don’t know tone of voice from written words, we have to guess. Depending on tone of voice, “You didn’t have anything to nibble?” could infer he’s asking if they have a little something because he’s hungry—like a smoker out of cigarettes might ask for one. Or with a different tone of voice, it could be “You don’t have even a little Gefilte fish

appetizer, lads?” In which case it’s a little man-teasing. If you walk past a stranger fishing on a public park dock, and you notice they don’t have any fish in the poly-bucket, you don’t draw attention to it. “You don’t even have a little rock bass, brother?” That would not play. Unless it were a friend teasing. But while Jesus recognizes them, they don’t yet recognize him. So they don’t get the playful tease—they just assume it’s a nervy stranger without social skills. **“They replied to him “No.” Then he said to them, “Throw in the net to the right side of the boat, and you’ll find something**

Now remember Jesus was a builder, not a fisherman by trade. But once before, when Peter first met Jesus, he was out fishing with partners, the sons of Zebedee (also fishing with him in John 21) and Jesus pulls the same trick, “Bad luck all night? Try it over there” and the same results. So he has this uncanny ability to pick good spots for people who know better he does how to fish. Back to John 21: ***They threw it in accordingly, and discovered they no longer had strength*** [7 men, on the young side] ***to drag it back, there were so many fish in it.*** That’s a lot of Gefilte fish, right?

Hence the student Jesus loved, said to Peter, “It’s the Rabbi!” It’s now dawning on them who is over there standing on the shore. ***Simon Peter, hearing this, tied his outer garment around his waist (as he had stripped)*** [my daughter Oceana would call this TMI] ***But the other students came in the small boat, as they weren’t far from land—only about 300 feet—dragging the net full of fish. Then as they climbed out onto the land, they saw a charcoal fire laid, and a cooked relish [a little something, a little eatable, something to nibble] lying on that, and a loaf. And Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the relish [the little appetizer] you’ve caught just now.”*** We have every reason to infer he’s teasing here, he’s speaking playfully to his old friends. Maybe they joked in the past about his uncanny ability to pick fishing spots, given he wasn’t a pro. Maybe he really enjoyed this ability he had. Whatever, he doesn’t really need any more fish—he’s fixed the little something for them already. And yet, ***Simon Peter,*** [ever the impulsive-obtuse one in these situations, doesn’t get the joke] ***climbed into the boat and dragged the net onto the dry land; the net was full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them. But even though there were so many, the net didn’t tear.*** [If you made your living catching fish, like Peter did, you would count the fish, it’s like counting money you find left on the ground, and you would remember that number, 153.]

After that, Jesus invites the lads for breakfast around the charcoal fire. Remember, Peter denied Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested, warming his hands around a charcoal fire in eyeshot of Jesus being interrogated. So Jesus is setting things up to signal to Peter that they can be friends again, despite the injury to their relationship caused by Peter saying “I never knew the man!” On the fire is the little appetizer, like Gefilte fish, and a loaf of bread. Jesus serves them. And after breakfast Peter and Jesus go for a walk to talk it out.

Let’s leave it there for now. I mentioned that these dozen or so stories that involve Jesus appearing after his death to his disciples, offers a guide for discerning our own experience of God, at least those experiences mediated by rabbi Jesus. They help us pick out maybe the genuine divine connections

Some people, over time, develop a sense of a place they go—either out in nature, or in the mind’s eye (realm of imagination) or maybe a favorite deer stand out in the woods, or a fishing spot, or a certain ritualized activity like knitting, where over time, they have a sense of connecting with G-d. My place took shape 17 years ago and it’s more of an interior heart place. Everyone has different ways of getting to such places, and mine is a little quirky. I have a certain chair I sit in, almost always light a candle, and then I do Divine Hours (a form of fixed hour prayer) to focus my mind and slow my brain. Then I use a repetitive prayer (mantra) Jesus prayer. The mind focus helps the chatter in my brain to slow down, fade enough that I sometimes feel like my mind is floating down into my chest region, where I have a sometimes wispy, sometime more vivid sense of sitting around a campfire, with Jesus there with me.

Sometimes we just sit there like an old married couple. Sometimes I mention loved ones. Sometime feelings emerge that I realize I could process with him. Last week, I took some partially unprocessed fear—one got stuck in me a while back and pops out in a recurring night terror. This time on the way into the campfire space, I was aware of the fear and wanted to look at with the aid of Jesus. A memory pops up...a vivid memory of me talking to a colleague about my changing views on something. This guy says, “Well where are you landing Ken on this? It’s sounds like you’ve landed. And if you have, you’ve landed outside the circle.” I sit with that—that was more threatening than I quite noticed at the time. At a safe remove from all that now, I’m aware of the reasons for that—details not relevant here. But I get it all out—what I was so afraid of back then,

losing my group belonging. And while I'm talking about this in my campfire place—it feels more like mental telepathy than talking in there—distinct words form in my mind as though planted by Jesus, there's a peaceful quiet before and after, and the words are, "What circle would that be?" He's responding to my memory of that guy saying, "If you've landed where I think you've landed on this issue, you've landed outside the circle." That simple question that I perceived to come in the voice and with the personality of Jesus, unshackled me in some way from that fear that had lodged in me. It was the tone of voice: "What circle would *that* be?" Like here I am sitting in a circle around a campfire with Jesus and this is my secure attachment base—this is the circle that really matters and not fear-enforced circle I used to be part of.

What matters to me...