

Reimagining Your Soul Pt. 1

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- [0 : 0 0] Two people are walking down a road, and it's a Sunday, and it's a seven-mile walk that is going to take them maybe a couple of hours, maybe two and a half hours.
- They're crestfallen, they're a little bit discouraged, and as they're talking with each other, a third person joins them. And the third person says, what are you talking about?
- And the couple are astonished that this person doesn't seem to know the news that is headline news throughout the whole city, in fact, probably the whole region.
- And so they, in astonishment, explain to him that their best friend has been tortured to death, and that they were absolutely mortified themselves that this had happened.
- And then they use a phrase, they say, we had hoped, we had hoped. Then they go on to say that he would rescue our country, or to put it in modern language, we had hoped he would give us our country back.
- [1 : 0 4] And those three words, we had hoped, form the underlying theme of what I'm going to talk to you about. What have you hoped for that has not happened?
- I had hoped this would happen, but it didn't. Or to put it another way, I hoped this wouldn't happen, but it did. Now, if that's never happened to you, if your life has gone along so sweetly that every hope you had has been fulfilled, I'm not sure you've been concentrating.
- But if it hasn't happened to you yet, it will. We all have our disappointments, we have our struggles, and we have our hopes that go unfulfilled. And their hopes died with their friend being tortured to death.
- And that's why they were crestfallen. Let me change the scene for you, because I'm not going to speak about that episode. We might come back to it. But I'll change the scene for you. And if you want to look at the biblical passage that I'm speaking about, I'm not going to read it in full, but it's John chapter 20 in the first 18 verses.
- And if you have a Bible, keep it open, because I'm going to narrate that story as well as try and draw some lessons out of it. And if you've got a church Bible, it's on page 1089.
- [2 : 2 1] There you go. I've learned all the numbers in the church Bible, 1089. But if you do have that in front of you, it will help. So the scene changes now. A young woman is standing by a rich man's tomb.
- It doesn't look much like a tomb to you and me, because it's a cave with a big stone in front of it. And she is in double agony. The first agony is that she has seen her best friend tortured to death two days earlier.
- The second agony for her is now she has come to try and cleanse his wounds, put some spices on his body, and wrap him again in linen.
- But the body is missing. So her first agony is the loss. And now the second agony is she cannot find his body. Two unusual strangers encounter her and start asking her some questions.

And while she's looking at them, their faces change. Their expressions change because she becomes aware of somebody behind her. As she inquires of this person, he speaks her name.

[3 : 42] And when he speaks her name, her world changes. In fact, not only her world changed, but the whole world changed.

And your world changed. And my world changed when he spoke her name. Her name was Miriam. The name that was spoken so tenderly was not from a man tortured to death, but a man standing in front of her, living and breathing.

She throws her arms around him. She's holding him so tightly. She's probably kissing his forehead or his cheeks or his hands. But she is just transfixed by what she sees.

And the man is Jesus of Nazareth. She had seen him breathe his last at three o'clock on Friday. And now she's hugging him, warm, breathing and alive.

Her full name is Miriam of Magdala. We know her as Mary Magdalene. And she is the first person to see Jesus of Nazareth risen from the dead.

[4 : 56] That's why the whole world changed. Because in that moment, everything changed. But she was, prior to that moment, sobbing.

Weeping because of the loss. And she stands in that moment, for all of us who've loved and lost, tears of pain that she's crying.

And her tears in that moment joined oceans of tears that have been wept over history and since. We will all cry them one day if we haven't cried them already.

You know of someone you've loved and lost. And if you haven't yet, you will. Because that's a fact of life. So you might want to just think for a minute about your tears that you've cried over something or someone that you've lost.

And we all cry them because they're symptoms of a dying heart. They're symptoms of a dying world. But they are the precursor to the rising heart.

[6 : 06] And it's the rising heart that I want to try and talk to you about and explain to you. As Sunday was dawning, something was dawning in Mary's heart, her soul.

It was a realization that the person in front of her had beaten death and had beaten the end of heartbeats. The person in front of her was mending her broken heart.

He was solving the puzzle of death itself. It's a huge moment. It looks like a tiny moment, but it's a massive moment. And she was going to have to step back to see it.

So Jesus is saying, don't hold on to me. Step back. Because what's happening here is enormous. And she would have to let go. The same time she's struggling to believe.

If you've been a Christian or in church life for a long time, maybe you don't struggle to believe. But the first people who encountered these moments struggled to believe them.

[7 : 11] As you would if somebody you knew had died and you are now seeing them alive. You would struggle to believe it. All the others in the story also struggled to believe.

Because they were all living with heart conditions. Heart conditions. Heart diseases of guilt. Of regret.

Of confusion. Of doubt. And we carry these heart conditions within us. But in front of Mary, in front of Miriam, the puzzle of death was being solved.

In that moment. Her heart was being transformed. So a little bit about death. I'm not going to dwell on death. You'll be pleased to know. I'm going to dwell on life.

But a little bit on death for those of you who like details. We all die. I assume you have realized that one out of every one of us dies.

[8 : 14] It's the ultimate statistic. It's nice to see my favorite statistician here. But just to clarify, the ultimate statistic is one out of one of us dies.

But you might be interested to know, only because I'm interested in these kind of details, we start dying in different ways, in different stages, in different parts of our bodies.

In case you're interested, your lung and brains start to age around age 20. Your skin around 25. Your muscles around the age 30.

Your bones around the age 35. Your eyes and teeth around the age of 40. Your kidneys around the age of 50. And your hearing starts to shrivel around 55.

Your taste and smell reduce from 60 onwards. And your voice and bladder from 65 onwards. Many of us know these things already.

[9 : 18] Your liver can carry on to 70. But after 70, you might find that your liver's giving you trouble as well. I didn't mention the heart. The heart ages from 40.

So for the first 20 years, we're growing and developing. And then the rest of our lives, we're dying. We live in a dying world. And we have different approaches to death, don't we?

There are two broad approaches to death in our world. One is to say, when you're dead, you're dead. That's it. It's finished. It's all over. And many people believe that. We just go back into the ground or into ashes and that's what it is.

There's the other approach that says, well, no, there's more to life than this. There is an afterlife. And there's something beyond. Now, that something beyond will vary.

People will talk about reincarnation or they'll talk about some sort of transformation into something or someone else. But there's those two big approaches.

[10 : 18] But then there's a third one, which is the Christian approach. And it's really important, however long you've been a Christian or however familiar you are with the Christian story, it's very important that you remember this is the foundation of our faith.

Everything that's happening here today is because we believe that Jesus of Nazareth died and three days later rose from the dead.

The whole of the Christian faith is founded on that. In fact, Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul, said this, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.

Your faith is futile. In fact, he spells it out. He says, your faith is useless. Our teaching is useless. Preachers are liars. And Christians are, of all people, the most miserable.

Now, you might think that Christians are pretty miserable anyway, but that's not what he's saying. He's saying, if Jesus has not risen from the dead, we're all wasting our time. There is no point in being here.

[11 : 21] It's that important. So let me just spell out why, because when you are facing your pain and your struggle, it might be worth remembering why this is so important.

Why is it so important that Jesus has risen from the dead? Well, 16 times in the Gospels, Jesus claimed he was going to die and rise again. If that did not happen, we have no hope from the past, because he turns out to be a liar and a fraud, or at least mistaken.

The second reason is his rising is our guarantee. Why do you believe in life after death? Because Jesus said, if you believe in me, even though you die, you will live again.

If he hasn't risen, we have no hope for life after death. We have no hope for our future. But there's something else. We believe Jesus' death solved a problem, don't we?

Jesus' death solved the problem of our inability to connect with God. His death and resurrection gives us the power to live connected to God.

[12 : 38] A living Jesus connects us to a living God. If he's not alive, we have no hope for now. We have no hope for the present. So you see, if the resurrection didn't happen, we've got no hope from the past, no hope for the future, and no hope for the present.

And, even more, God said he raised Jesus from the dead. If Jesus isn't raised from the dead, God is shown to be a fraud. So it's really important that we keep coming back to the fact that Jesus is alive.

And he showed himself in 10 or 11, I'm going to go with 10, 10 moments to his followers over a period of 40 days.

And he changed their lives as they witnessed this. He convinced them he had beaten death. And he transformed their dying hearts into rising hearts.

They all had different heart conditions, like you and I have different heart conditions. But the risen Jesus meets us and transforms our hearts from dying hearts into rising hearts, so that you can reimagine your soul.

[13 : 49] This is central to our faith. And the thing about the 10 resurrection appearances is they're not just the same.

Each one of them deals with a heart condition. And we'll see next week another heart condition that his second appearance deals with. But in this case, he is dealing with a broken heart.

Mary was broken hearted. Her heart was wrecked in grief. She was sobbing uncontrollably. My 25-year-old nephew died a few years ago of an accidental drug and alcohol overdose.

I was very close to him. He was very close to me. I sobbed when he died. I also sobbed when I saw the pain in my sister, his mother's life and her husband's life.

Mary loved Jesus. She had met him two years before. She was a follower. But he had set her free. The Bible says that she was set free of seven demons.

[15 : 03] Now, we may not know all that that means, but she was set free of something very serious. And Jesus set her free. If you've seen the series, The Chosen, there is a moment in it where nobody can help Mary.

And then Jesus helps her, sets her free. And she was full of gratitude to Jesus. Like you would be if you go to hospital and a surgeon saves your life.

Or a counselor or therapist brings you through your dark times. Or a friend turns up when you're drunk. Now, I'm looking around.

I don't see much evidence of that kind of debauchery here. But you become grateful when somebody's there in your dark times, aren't you? And Jesus has rescued her.

And she has become his friend. And the last days of his life, she would not let him out of her sight. She was his friend.

[16 : 05] And she loved him. And after the horrors of what we call Good Friday, she wants to honor him. She wants to clean his wounds, apply the spices, and wrap him tenderly.

Now her grief is consumed with shock and frustration and anger. And if you have loved and lost, you will know what that means.

Grief has a language of its own. It has an agenda of its own. It has a timetable of its own. And if you've experienced grief, deep grief, you will know there are no rules.

It just hits you every so often. It just consumes you. And you can't control it. You can try, but you can't control it. And there's a word that people use, closure.

I think it's a myth. We don't get closure. We might get a little bit of softening of the pain or easing of the pain. But closure is a word that people use about someone so they can feel better about that person's grief.

[17 : 14] Closure is not what the grieving person gets. Closure is an idea. But I don't think it works like that. And we hear about the stages of grief. As if there's this stage, go through this stage, then that stage, then this stage.

It's not like that, is it? It's just messy. And if you've loved and lost, you'll know what it was like. And you will know what Mary was experiencing. So just to take a step back, we'll go through the sequence of events real quick and then home in on some of the resolution moments.

Mary and a group of women went first thing on Sunday morning to the tomb. These women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb.

They went first thing on Sunday morning to the tomb. I just want to honor that fact. They go back and tell their friends that the tomb is empty. Peter and John run to the tomb and eventually both go in and have a look and realize it's empty.

And then everyone starts to go back home. Everyone except Mary. She could not bring herself to leave.

[18 : 28] Being close was better than not being there at all. Her deep love meant she wanted to stay and just be there where his resting place was.

So she stands and weeps. Then the woman who was delivered of seven demons meets two angels. Now, I don't know what you think about demons and angels, but the world does not make sense without the evil of demons and the goodness of angels.

And if we want to live a Christian life, we will almost certainly encounter both. So I just flagged that up. If you think you can go through life without encountering the demonic or the angelic, then you're not really focusing on the entire Christian experience.

The Bible is full of information. We are not to become obsessed with either, but we're not to be ignorant either. Anyway, so she encounters these angels.

And as I said, their expressions change. And eventually, when she turns around and sees Jesus, he asks her two questions. I know I'm overlaying the chapter as I go, but I'm trying to go deeper each time.

[19 : 45] He asks her two questions. Woman, why are you crying? And then, who is it you're looking for? And her reply, basically, was just tell me where he is.

I just want to know if you've taken his body, tell me where it is. And then, the name and the embrace. Miriam. The whole exchange took place in Aramaic because her reply was Rabboni.

These are two Aramaic words. In this moment, her broken heart was transformed into a rising heart. And I would suggest to you, Jesus will meet you with your name and an embrace when you're brokenhearted.

It's a woman's story, this. So, I don't want to take away and say everybody is going to be the same in this story. This is a woman's story.

But if you're a man with a broken heart, forgive me for being slightly psychological here, but you'll need to get in touch with the feminine side of your nature, which psychologists call the anima, so that you can receive the name and the embrace.

[20 : 58] And by the way, women have a masculine side, men have a feminine side. But that's not the main point of my sermon. But he will meet you with a name and an embrace.

And these questions are designed to open up the conversation about brokenheartedness. Name and embrace, and then the questions.

Now, Mary had a history. She loved him. She was grateful to him. She donated to him. And I would think it's true to say she was in love with him. She loved him deeply. And she focused on him.

How you react to these questions will be related to your history with Jesus. Are you indifferent? Are you in love with him? Do you worship him? Is he your friend?

But if you are brokenhearted, this is how he will meet you. There's no doubt she loved him. What she was about to discover was how much he loved her.

[22 : 00] So the questions. Why are you crying? Now, it seems obvious. She's crying because she's lost her friend and she can't find his body.

But it's not as simple as that. The last, well, not the last time, but one of the last times I truly sobbed on my knees with my body shaking was when my marriage died 12 years ago.

And I was uncontrollably weeping. But if you'd said to me, Jeff, why are you crying? I couldn't have given you one answer. There would have been 100 answers.

And for Mary, it was death, it was torture, it was loss, it was confusion. But as I said, she's joining a river of tears.

It's the death of her beloved friend. It's death itself. It connects with the fact of our own death. It reminds us of our own mortality.

[23 : 00] It reminds us of the cause of death, which is sin. Mary believed that people died because of sin, because that's what her Bible told her. And when you and I weep, we weep over sin and death.

We weep over death itself. We weep over our own mortality. That's why Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Not just for Lazarus. He knew he was going to raise Lazarus.

He was weeping over death itself and the sin and death in the world. So when you and I weep, we connect with human sorrow. We cry over sin and death.

Did Mary know all this in the moment? I doubt it. It probably took her the rest of her life to process this and to realize it. But why you're crying opens a door.

Then Jesus says, who is it you're looking for? Now let me spell that out for you. When a baby is born, a baby is looking for someone.

[24 : 01] It's hard when a baby laughs to stay depressed, isn't it? But a baby born, when you and I were born, we were looking for a father and mother. We're just born with that desire.

As time goes by, the child starts looking for friends. And the teenager starts looking anywhere, but with father and mother, but for friends who will wear the same jeans and listen to the same music and so on.

But they're looking for peers and friends. As we grow older, we might look for teachers. We might look for mentors. We might look for employers and leaders. And then as we go further in life, we might look for a life partner or a companion.

And then as life goes towards the last stages, we might be looking for a carer. But we're looking for people, aren't we? We're not looking for love in an abstract sense.

We're looking for love in human form. That's what we're all looking for. That's what you're looking for this morning. Love in human form. If you find it, you want to hold on to it.

[25 : 10] If you lose it, you weep. And Mary had found it. She had found love in human form for two years. And now she's lost it. And she's weeping.

But Mary was looking for the one she had loved. But she was looking for the lifeless body of the one she loved. She was looking for Jesus of Nazareth.

But she was looking for the dead Jesus of Nazareth. But she was discovering that he was looking for her. Miriam. Who was she looking for really?

Well, in the story, she says, teacher, rabboni, master. Love in human form dies. If it finds you, at some point you die.

But he is showing her something else here in this moment. He's showing her eternal love in human form. And that's different. That's why the resurrection is so important.

[26 : 15] Because we're all looking for eternal love in human form. It's a love that does not die. It's a love that overcomes death.

It's a love that gives her hope that she will rise. This is what we're all looking for. Even if we don't know it. We're looking for this.

We're not looking for something that will die. Or will remind us of our own death. We're looking for something that is eternal. And even though you die, you will live again.

If you believe in me, said Jesus. And in this embrace, Mary believed more than she'd ever believed in her whole life. You and I are looking for this. Our tears fall over sin and death and loss.

But they're met with a name and an embrace. And the one we've been looking for all our lives. Now I'm just going to speculate for a minute.

[27 : 12] Forgive me and don't write to any Baptist authorities or any elders of the church here. If you don't like what I'm just about to say. But I'm just going to speculate. And I freely admit it's speculating. But much is written about Mary's relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

Some people have said, oh, they were married. Some people have said she was an apostle. And there's much wild speculation about their relationship. Mainly from male speculators, in fact.

But let me put a context on this. Preachers from this platform, time and time again, will have told you that Jesus of Nazareth was fully human.

They will have said he was human in every way, just as you and I are, except without sin. The Bible says he grew in stature and in wisdom, in Luke chapter 2.

The Bible shows us a picture of a man who got thirsty, who got hungry, who weeps, who gets angry, who gets tired, who sleeps, who eats, who goes to parties. He was a carpenter.

[28 : 13] He was a son. He was a brother. He was a friend. He was a teacher. He speaks several languages. Hebrews said a body was prepared for him and that he was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.

He sympathizes with us. In other words, he's fully human. We have a word for it. Incarnation. He became fully human. So here's my question. It's a speculative question, but it's an interesting one.

Did the 33-year-old Jesus of Nazareth know what it was to be in love? And some of you are reacting with horror at the question being asked.

And your reaction will tell you about your view of love and your view of Jesus and your view of humanity. And some people are horrified. And of course, we're not told whether Jesus of Nazareth fell in love, except for this moment with Mary.

This is the embrace of God with a heartbroken human being. But it's the embrace of a man comforting his dear friend.

[29 : 24] And listen to his next words. Do not hold on to me. I have not yet ascended to my Father. Go instead and tell my brothers, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Now, what we call the ascension took place 50 days later. So what's he saying here? I need to get back and do some business with my Father.

But it's almost like he's interrupted his schedule to give her this moment. However you look at it, it's a tender, loving, kind moment.

Magdala means tower. Mary Magdalene means Mary the tower. He was her teacher, but she was his tower.

There's something intimate and special about this moment. Make of it what you will, but it's an act of great tenderness. And it's the first encounter.

[30 : 27] It's bathed in tears, but it mends a broken heart. And it tells you not just how much Mary loved Jesus, but how much Jesus loved her.

She heard her name. She felt his embrace. She heard her questions. But as she stood back, she realized how much he loved her.

And that's true for you, whether you're a man or a woman here today. Jesus' love is profound and deep and turns our broken hearts, our dying hearts, into rising hearts.

He's beaten death. I remember a friend of mine who was an Australian preacher, and he said that sometimes he, in the morning, struggled to believe.

And then he said, I would say to myself, have I got any new information? That Jesus is not risen from the dead? He spoke with a South African accent. And have I got new information that the tomb wasn't empty?

[31 : 29] No. Have I got new information that Jesus didn't show himself to his followers? No. Well, then get up and get on with it. The resurrection changes everything. And the last thing I'll say is this.

There is a paradox in tears. Tears show the presence of power. It's a powerful thing to cry, but loss of control. Tears show the presence of pain, but the loss of a loved one.

Tears can be unstoppable, even though we try and control them. They can be tears of sadness and tears of misunderstanding, because tears can blind our eyes as well as evoke passion.

Tears can get in the way or tears can open the way. And you will see over these appearances how something's got in the way and something's opened the way.

Either way, the surprise of the new dawn arrived with the beloved. It still does. Let's turn to prayer.

[32 : 45] Some of you here this morning know you have a broken heart. You're in pain. You may have even cried this morning. So let's bring our brokenheartedness to the Lord.

Lord Jesus, we're looking for you in our brokenheartedness and in our pain, in our grief and in our loss.

We're looking for you. And the Lord will speak your name as you look for him and allow you to embrace him and allow you to embrace him that he will embrace you.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have beaten the end of heartbeats, that you have overcome death, that we don't have to live in a we had hoped state of mind, but you have brought us hope.

Thank you, Lord, that as we believe in you this morning, even though we die, we will live again. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have overcome death itself.

[33 : 55] And we pray for everyone here who is experiencing the pain of a broken heart, that you will speak into their broken hearts.

You will speak their names. You will embrace them. The tender questions of why are you crying and who are you looking for. Lord, we pray to do their work in our hearts today.

Lord, we don't want to go away from this moment still broken hearted. We pray that you will be transforming our broken hearts into rising hearts.

While you're still in an attitude of prayer, if you are feeling a sense of broken heartedness about anything this morning, don't go away without encountering the risen Jesus.

come down to the front, an elder or a leader or myself will be very willing to pray with you to help you as we can.

[35 : 07] But don't carry things that Jesus wants you to be free from. He cannot be free from grief over a loved one, but we can be free from the tyranny of a heart so broken that we cannot function.

So come down to the front. There will be some music in a minute. And one of us will sit with you. Don't walk away carrying the pain you don't have to carry.

Lord Jesus, we praise you that you are alive and that changes everything. Amen.