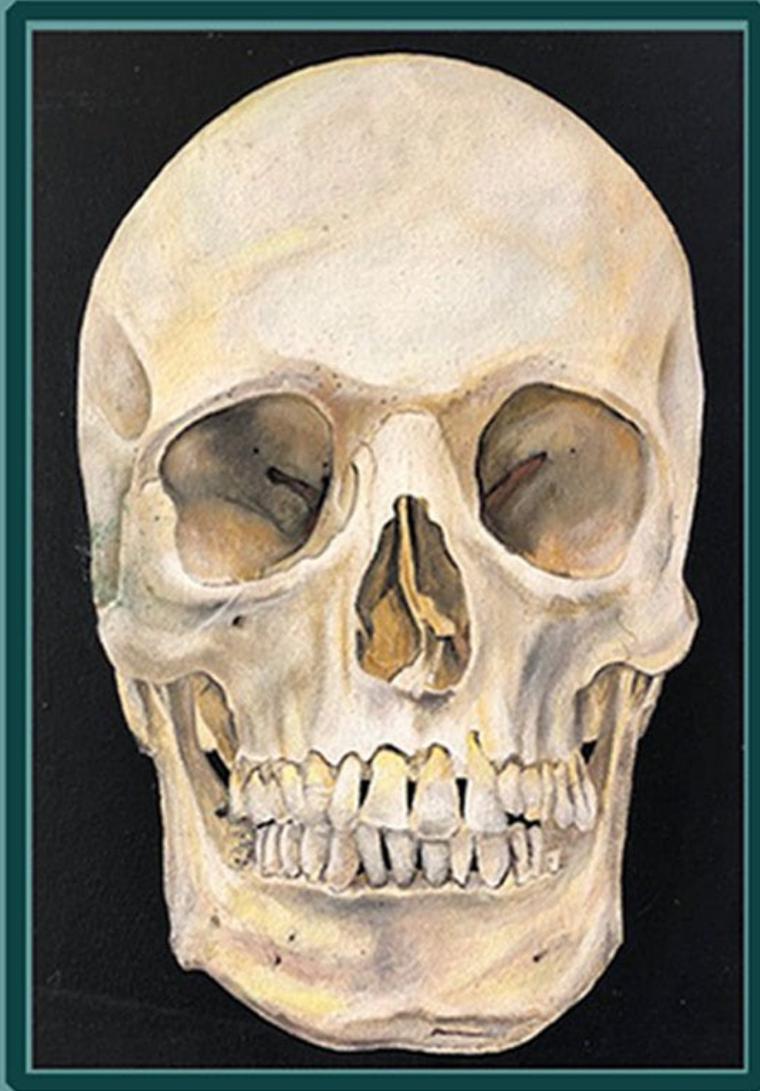


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



The Skull
and the Enigma of Death

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THE SKULL AND THE ENIGMA OF DEATH

The power of a skull

Even today there is something powerful about a skull – or spooky depending on your view of death.

So why is Mary Magdalene depicted gazing at a skull or with a skull at her feet? Some say it's related to her death, and that she is looking at her own skull. This relates to the legend that she spent her final years in a cave in Provence in the south of France, nourished only by the sacred host provided by angels. The cave became a place of pilgrimage in the early centuries of Christianity and still is. In the nearby basilica of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume the main attraction was what authorities claimed to be Mary Magdalene's skull.

In the medieval churches of Europe relics such as this and other bones of saints and martyrs were a major source of income. They were kept in richly decorated reliquaries and were purported to be the source of healing and miracles.

In our sense-based world, decaying bodily remains are more likely to be a treasure trove for gruesome horror film images of half decomposed zombies and leering skeletons. But despite relics having lost much of their crowd drawing capacity, the aura around those legendary sacred places in the south of France continues. In the next portal 'Legends of the Magdalene' we will look at this in more detail.

Meanwhile an enduring church teaching is that the same physical body we had in life will be resurrected. The bodies of those who are 'saved' will, of course, be transformed into a pristine state, minus disease and decay. If that's the case the medieval collectors of relics were probably doing the dead a disservice by distributing their bones – a finger here, a leg bone there – around the medieval churches.

There's a deeper connection going on

In many cultures down the ages, skulls or heads (actual or carved) have been associated with oracular power, the ability of the dead to speak to the living, like the head of the murdered bard Orpheus that continued to sing as it floated out to sea.

In Jericho and other places in the land of Mary Magdalene, plastered-over skulls with shells for eyes have been found. They must have been revered

for such care to be taken. These preserved and decorated skulls forged a link with souls in the other world, either as a reminder like the photos we take, or as the conduit for communication. The skulls date from thousands of years before Mary Magdalene's time, yet a skull still had deep symbolism for first century people. Something of a skull's meaning lingers even now in the imagination.



L. One of the decorated skulls found in the ancient city of Jericho; R. Decorated skull sculpture by Australian artist Diane Thompson, which points to the lasting enigma and fascination surrounding skulls.

Really, the message of the skull is that the hard boundary between this physical world and spirit is an illusion. The spirit is ever present, and so the dead are with us, and those with the ability to communicate with the realm of spirit are not connecting with something beyond and apart. They are engaging within a great unified web of existence.

Death is a Mystery

Jesus was crucified on a hill outside the gates of Jerusalem called Golgotha. It means 'place of the skull'. John's gospel describes Mary Magdalene as being present as a witness, along with Jesus's mother and Mary wife of Clopas and one man, the beloved disciple. Their courage and love would have given them an intimation of the reality behind the death of their master. Other female disciples kept watch at a distance. In contrast the male disciples who walked with Jesus over three years, gave up hope and disappeared into hiding.

In the gospels Mary Magdalene (sometimes with other women) is the first to experience the extraordinary event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without vision-extending drugs, in waking consciousness she saw the Christ-permeated spiritualised form of Jesus. This says something about the qualities of the feminine to perceive the reality of death's most profound mystery, despite most of the male disciples not believing their news.

In the painting below by French Baroque artist Georges de la Tour, he focused on Mary Magdalene's inner experience. He painted his Magdalene with the skull in a night-time setting. In a work of simplicity and deep quietness, Mary seems to be thoughtfully musing and remembering the life-changing reality she experienced.

The candlelight focuses our attention and invites us to join her meditative mood as she contemplates the mystery surrounding death. The way the artist portrayed her emerges from a reality that includes yet transcends the physical.



The real meaning of *Christos*, 'the Anointed', relates to a unique event in time, the offering and sacrifice of a high spiritual being to unite with the

man Jesus. Divine beings had no knowledge of death until the Christ, the incarnating *elohim*, underwent this awesome but universal earthly event – and so experienced the full human condition on behalf of the higher worlds.

Through death Jesus filled with the Christ brought the divine ones closer to human beings again, as it was in the beginning. It is our task now to acknowledge and know their presence as near as a heartbeat.

Mary encounters a spiritual reality

If we are to come to an understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we have Mary Magdalene's experience to draw on, when grieving to the depths of her soul she comes face to face with a spiritual reality.

It's there in John's gospel. The author goes way beyond the other gospels to portray what she experienced. Jesus has died, and early on the first day of the week Mary comes alone to the garden tomb where his body lies (John 20).

There is an evocation of the very first garden at the dawn of creation, the garden where the Fall took place. This fall is so much more than a sinful Eve succumbing to the serpent's temptation. The Garden of Eden portrays a primeval humanity, an innocent state in which the human being is immersed in the divine. The temptation is to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, an awakening that is both a blessing and a curse yet is vital for the evolution of human consciousness, in a physical body in a physical world. In portal one, we have followed, albeit briefly, this immense esoteric story that covers the whole, and continuing, destiny of humanity and of the world we inhabit.

But in this garden on Easter morning, there is no serpent; for this is the first day of a new creation. It's still dark although dawn is near. The light is emerging. This is how I have visualized Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb:

As she let free her tears, the marvellous events of three years flowed through them. The more she wept the more her tears watered the many-petalled flower of love.

She knelt for some time until love made her rise and look into the tomb. Out of that full-blooming perfumed flower, her vision was born anew, not the old way of her seeing accompanied by a multitude of subjective colourings, but vision born from the prism of Wisdom's knowing.

Then she saw the messengers all clothed in white and glorious. They spoke to that part of her which some call nous and some the pearl in the soul, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' and inwardly she replied and found the strength to turn and see the man standing in the dawn light by the young green vine.

At first Mary does not recognise Jesus and thinks he must be a gardener until he speaks her name. Names have power; sound resonates in the ether. And the sound of her name strikes like music in her heart. She is stopped by his voice, by the power of the Word speaking through the teacher. She knows him although he is much changed. She has turned full circle and is awake to the numinous. He says:

'Don't touch me, for I have not yet ascended into the Father.' She pauses and, although it cannot yet reach her daytime mind, she understands. She is to look now through eyes washed clear by love, to witness this: His transformed body raised as a body of light, uniting with the divine cosmos because the cosmic I AM is his living spirit. Mary's vision extends. She sees the world's finer layers being saturated with this life, this cosmic spirit. It will continue. It has not ended. For her, time has ceased, and this is the eternal point when the I AM breathes into the world for resurrection and life, her resurrection and life.

(excerpts from *Marriages of the Magdalene* based on John 20)

Now, here, Mary's perception has been purified and has become true spiritual vision and knowledge of the higher worlds in action through the man who was her teacher and is now the Christ.

O death where is thy sting?

The Christ mystery is multi layered. Here I'll address the layer related to a personal path towards the spiritual self or I AM, sometimes called the inner Christ. So many interpretations of the gospels lack understanding. For the story was never a promise that our physical bodies would rise out of the graves at a given triumphal moment in time, to live on forever in a state of bliss. As witness to the resurrection of Jesus, Mary Magdalene perceived the transformation fulfilled in him through the awesome Christ spirit in three extraordinary years. This contains a template for what we might achieve, but over many lifetimes, over aeons.

'Resurrection' is about transformation and metamorphosis – a process that culminates in the harmonisation and spiritualisation of our whole being, body and soul, to become one with the cosmic Christ individualised in us as our spirit. The essence is summed up in John 12: 24-25:

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

'Eternal life' needs to be freed from the concept of time and understood as a state of being that links us with the spirit of the cosmos. This is to be imbued with divine eternity. And it is the meaning behind Paul's words, 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' The hope is that Christ, the I AM, the eternal 'I' will unite with our soul.

The ultimate end purpose of the Fall countless aeons ago is for us to become fully conscious, able to be co-creators with the spiritual world. Many are on this journey. It is the rarest soul who achieves the spiritual level from which their soul can work powerfully from spirit and choose when to incarnate. Such an initiate will always play a significant and valuable role in the world's evolution.

In the path Mary Magdalene walked, the power and mystery of death revealed as love continued to manifest for the healing and enrichment of many. Her story is a potent example of true commitment to the spiritual path. She has reached the highest level of initiation and has been here again, I'm sure of it, to bring wisdom and goodness into a troubled world. Death is but one passing through. This is the mystery she contemplates, that lies behind the enigma of the skull.

All of us, although still evolving, can work for divine good. This may not involve anything overtly spiritual. It can take place in any field, local or worldwide. But lifetime after lifetime as the spirit awakens, so our contribution will bear much fruit indeed of the life and the love flowing forth from the light of the Word.