

ANOINTING JESUS: HOW MARY MAGDALENE INITIATED THE LOVE AT THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY by Cynthia Bourgeault

As Holy Week is now upon us, I invite us to consider the anointing of Jesus by Mary as our own invitation into the Paschal Mystery.

Christ is not Jesus' last name—an obvious but so-often overlooked truism. It means “the anointed one.” And however much his followers may have wished otherwise, the fact is that he became “the Anointed One” at the hands of a woman bearing a jar of precious perfume and she sealed him with the unction of her love.

Traditionally this woman is remembered to have been Mary Magdalene.

I believe that the traditional memory of Mary Magdalene as Jesus' anointer is substantially accurate and that there are valid and, in fact, urgent reasons for keeping this part of her portrait intact. It holds the key to understanding the Passion as an act of substituted love—not the distortion of the penal or atonement theory we've become accustomed to. It also captures the very essence of the alchemical feminine and offers a powerful ritual access point to the Christian pathway toward “restoration to the fullness of being.” -an act of conscious love marking the passageway into both physical and spiritual wholeness.

This moment of anointing also demonstrates the possibility of Jesus' own initiation into a pivot in his ministry: from an interior stance based initially on judgment and denunciation in his days with John the Baptist, he seems to later throw himself headlong in the direction of inclusivity and wholeness—toward a purity of heart that comes not from withholding but from letting everything flow. The fact that he may have discovered this truth in the context of a deeply flowing and intimate relationship with the person whom biblical tradition overwhelmingly remembers as his key companion and beloved student makes a good deal of sense.

The second reason for keeping Mary Magdalene closely linked to anointing is that it provides a ritual access point to Christianity's own deepest transformative wisdom. To begin with, it makes it virtually impossible to experience the Paschal Mystery in any

other way than redemptive love: We see that Jesus' passage is framed on either side by her parallel acts of anointing. At Bethany she sends him forth to the cross wearing the unction of love. And on Easter morning he awakens to that same fragrance of love as she arrives at the tomb with her spices and perfumes, expecting to anoint his body for death. He has been held in love throughout his entire passage. In so doing, Bruce Chilton declares, "Mary Magdalene established the place of anointing as the central ritual in Christianity, recollecting Jesus' death and pointing forward to his resurrection."

But what is she actually pointing forward to? What is this Paschal journey from a wisdom standpoint? In the common understanding, Christianity has tended to view the resurrection as Jesus' triumph over physical death. But for Christians in the wisdom tradition its meaning lies in something far deeper than merely the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus' real purpose in this sacrifice was to wager his own life against his core conviction that love is stronger than death, and that the laying down of self which is the essence of this love leads not to death, but to life.

Don't be so quick to turn Jesus' life and resurrection into abstractions to prove divinity that you miss the quiet radical message of what embodied conscious love can sow in our world!

Jesus was not about proving that a body lives forever, but rather that *the spiritual identity forged through kenotic self-surrender survives the grave and can never be taken away*. Thus, the real domain of the Paschal Mystery is not dying but dying-to-self. It serves as the archetype for all our personal experiences of dying and rising to new life along the pathway of kenotic transformation, reminding us that it is not only possible but *imperative* to fall through fear into love because that is the only way we will ever truly know what it means to be alive.

Within the context of the resurrection, then, anointing becomes the ritual most closely associated with the passage from death of self to fullness of life, from egoic alienation to "union on a higher plane." AS such, it conveys the very essence of Christianity's transformative wisdom.

And its gate keeper is Mary Magdalene.