

We can look at this gospel reading in three different ways.

Historically: there seems absolutely no reason to doubt the historicity of this gospel reading. It is given only in the gospel of John, but we know from the other gospels that Jesus had raised others from the dead: Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son. Reading the story in a literal and concrete way, we see the power of Jesus over physical death. But to properly appreciate this we need to adjust our perspective a little: because for human beings generally – and certainly for the Jews of Jesus' day – death was *everything*. From the moment we're born we are heading towards it and most of the time wishing we were going in the opposite direction. For Jesus, however, death was absolutely *nothing* – it was birth into a new and fuller life. For us, death is the great ending; for Jesus, it was the great beginning. Raising Lazarus from the dead was for our sakes, not his.

Symbolically: it is possible to see this story as a metaphor for – or a symbol of – the spiritual resurrection of a person whose soul is lost in darkness: someone whose life has been such that he is dead to all spiritual impulses, who has forgotten what prayer is, who does not know where to look for God or who no longer cares. One who languishes in the shadows and is lost to the light of God's grace and truth. And as Lazarus was bound, so men and women can be bound by lust, greed, addiction, the thirst for power, pride, etc. Even fear. This is why Jesus says: 'Unbind him, let him go free.' This

is St John's subtle, symbolic way of saying: Yes, the Lord raised Lazarus from the dead... but there are so many other layers of meaning to this.' St John was a master of multi-layered meaning. The Lord, above all, unbinds.

Theologically: the deepest theme of today's gospel is the triumph of hope. St John tells us this in his own unique way; but we have to grow into an understanding of how he tells things. He hints, he suggests, he uses metaphor and poetry – St John likes to leave clues.

The orthodox Jews of Jesus' day had no real belief in an after-life; that's why they thought that reward or punishment from God had to come in this life, if God is just. So death, for them, was hopeless enough. But in addition: they *did* believe – and the scriptural commentary of the rabbis taught them “that for three days after death the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back into the body; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it.” That's an actual quote from the rabbinic commentary. After that, the soul just disappears into a shadowy no man's land.

So, by waiting *four* days, Jesus was taking them beyond hopelessness into despair. And this was quite deliberate because he wanted to show them – and us – that we should *never* despair. Lazarus comes to life again. Everything in St John's gospel is *always* an exposition of the Prologue; so when the Prologue says: 'The light shines in the darkness and

the darkness could not overpower it', today's gospel reading is just one exposition – among many – of that: 'Hope shines in despair and despair could not overcome it.'

Today's gospel reading is telling us *never* to give up hope, *always* to have faith – even in situations when hope and faith seem grotesque – *especially* when hope and faith seem grotesque. Like, for example, life in this contemporary tormented world of ours.