

Why do scholars think this particular story of Lazarus is not historical—but rather a theological description of who this Jesus of Nazareth was? Well, let's look at our Gospel today: the story which gives us the 7<sup>th</sup> and final sign in what John himself calls the “book of Signs”.

But before we tackle this 7<sup>th</sup> sign, let's first recap the first 6 signs:

- The first comes right at the beginning of this Gospel: Jesus turns water into wine at Cana: not just a cup—but 150 GALLONS of wine. This is where the stage is set to see Jesus—NOT as just another prophet or miracle worker, not just another Moses—but as something much greater.
- The second sign: Jesus heals the Gentile officer's son—from a great distance, not from nearby. So he heals not only the people of his faith—but all faiths, and doesn't have to be present to do it.
- Third: Jesus heals someone who is not merely lame, but a man crippled for 38 years. It doesn't matter how long we've been suffering, we can always turn to Jesus and be healed.
- Fourth: A bigger and better feeding of the multitudes.
- Fifth: Jesus walks ON the water—rather than merely parting it.
- Sign 6 was last week:- we see Jesus open the eyes of a blind person—and not just any old blind person-- but one blind from birth! Anyone can see the truth of Jesus, even if they have not been exposed to it since birth.
- And now we have Lazarus being raised from the dead.

But Jesus raised other people, too—you might say: the little girl, the young man.

I'll share with you three specific reasons why scholars think this is not an historical story, but a theological one.

All the stories we hear about *Lazarus*—the brother of Martha and Mary—occur only in John. None of the other gospels: Matthew, Mark or Luke-- mention that Martha and Mary even have a brother, much less one who comes back from the dead. This incredible story of Lazarus – who is related to these well-known Bethany friends, set alongside the tale of him being raised from the dead – would most definitely have been something Peter or Paul—or one of the earlier gospel writers-- would definitely have mentioned. This Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, is not mentioned in any pre-John source. Before this was written, around 110 CE—Lazarus was not known.

A second clue that this is theological is the way the story unfolds. Jesus is told that Lazarus is dying, yet he doesn't make a move to see his friend until he is not only dead—but buried long enough for the body to begin decaying. It's almost as if Jesus is either very callous, or else trying to teach an important truth—and in a very detailed and extreme way.

Jesus is not just raising a young girl or a young man being carried to his burial. In each of these prior stories the biblical text acknowledges that some people thought that these “purportedly dead” people might have been only sleeping.

Not in this story. John makes the point that Jesus dawdles until Lazarus has been dead for several days. John wants his readers to understand that Lazarus is—as they say in *The Princess Bride*—ALL THE WAY dead.

When he finally arrives on the scene—even before he goes to help Lazarus-- he has lengthy theological discussions with both Martha and Mary and the crowd. Only then does he finally call Lazarus out of the tomb.

Lazarus complies—but slowly. He is still bound up. His legs and arms have been tied together, and the body is wrapped tightly in a shroud.

Lazarus is moving but with great trouble, because of his bindings. And he has an odor. Or for those of you who prefer the King James Version: “By this time he stinketh.”

Jesus tells the gawkers to unbind Lazarus.

So what is this non-historical story supposed to tell us theologically?

The story is telling John’s readers that Jesus can bring to life any thing or anyone who is dead—even if they have been dead for a long time.

Jesus can resurrect anyone from whatever has killed their faith or left them dead inside. And—like in Ezekiel’s vision, God- through Jesus- can even resurrect nations and peoples to new life in Jesus’ loving, life-giving, liberating Spirit.

It was John’s vision of the resurrected life in Jesus t- which breaks all human boundaries- that finally broke the synagogue in two. It broke the power of those who couldn’t stomach the message of who Jesus was, and why he died for everyone. It was inconceivable to some that Jesus was willing to restore to abundant life every ethnic group and nation, every single person who responded to Jesus’ call to new life.—that they were all to be allowed in—unbound. Freed.

John’s theological question is still argued today: Is it possible for everyone to be saved by the actions of one person, or must anyone who proclaims that message always die because some can’t *or won’t* believe that?

The question is: are all people God’s children and redeemed by Christ, or are we each responsible for our own and others redemption?

Is what we are enough? Or will some never be enough?

Jesus gave us the answers to these questions, but even after 2000 years these are still the questions that can tear apart people, families, communities and nations.

There are still those who are bound to their belief that some types of people are still “dead to God”, “dead in their sins”, dead to society. But they are not.

Jesus will come to everyone who is willing—those spiritually dead and fully alive-- and call them. Then it is up to us to help unbind them from what restricts them, so Jesus can set them free to live and love to the fullest.  
Amen.