The resurrection of Jesus, which we celebrate today, is at the heart of our Christian faith. Certainly, the assertion we just heard in this morning's gospel that Jesus rose on the third day after his death and appeared to his disciples is the most extraordinary claim we Christians make upon the credibility of the world. And so it is with some justice that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is considered what is distinctive about us as Christians. It distinguishes Christians from Jews and Muslims who believe in God and adhere to the Abrahamic tradition and consider Jesus to be a teacher or a prophet but no more. The resurrection of Jesus is at the foundation of our belief in the divinity of Christ and thus also of the doctrine of the Trinity. What I'd like to do this morning is to reflect briefly with you on just why the resurrection of Jesus is so decisive for our belief that Jesus is God. In other words, I want to ask you to think with me about the meaning of the resurrection for your own personal faith in Jesus Christ, and how the resurrection helps you to proclaim today, with all other Christians, that Jesus is Lord and God.

One of the classical ways of talking about the importance of the resurrection for our belief in the divinity of Jesus is to say that the resurrection was a proof of Jesus' divine sonship, a vindication of the special relationship with the Father that Jesus claimed during his life. Now I certainly don't mean to question this way of talking about the resurrection of Jesus. But if this were the only way someone had of understanding the resurrection, that person's faith would probably not be a deeply personal one. For to think of the resurrection as a kind of proof that Jesus was right about things all along is to treat it as something that is added on to Jesus' life after it is over. To use a fancy word, it is to make the resurrection extrinsic or unrelated to the life Jesus lived, so that we do not see what the resurrection had to do with the person of Jesus who is at the center of our religious lives.
I would like to suggest for you this morning another way of thinking about the resurrection, one that hopefully will help us understand a little better what this event has to do with lives of Christian faith centered on the person of Jesus.

To do this, I would like you to imagine for a moment that you were one of Jesus' disciples: perhaps one of the disciples we will encounter two Sundays from now on the road to Emmaus. For three years you had followed him along the byways and through the villages of Galilee and had accompanied him to Jerusalem. You had come to know and love him as the best, the most generous human being you had ever met. He had, in his love for you, touched your heart and affected your life so deeply that you were sure, having known him, you would never be the same again. And what is more, you had just seen him give up his life, but give it up in such a way that you knew it was not so much taken from him as offered by him, offered to keep faith with what he stood for and with those he loved, offered in loving trust to the one he called his Father.

These were the hopes and dreams that had been shattered in the brutality of his execution and buried in the seeming finality of his death. And so, like the two unknown disciples on their way back home to Emmaus, we think that we must return to the lives of quiet desperation that most of us live most of the time. To have seen Jesus again, as the disciples did in today's gospel story or on the road to Emmaus when they recognized him in the breaking of the bread, was first of all the fulfillment of the dearest, deepest hope of their lives. To them it meant that the best thing they had ever known was not just a shot in the dark, not pure chance, not just another illusion that had been destroyed by the brutal harshness of life. More than that, to have seen Jesus alive again meant that all he stood for was true: that love was worthwhile, and faithfulness and hope; that the pain and suffering of life, and even death, were not the last word: the last word was God's revelation that Jesus' gift of himself on the cross was actually the way to true life.

When the disciples looked back on the life of Jesus, and, inspired by his spirit, recalled the things he did for them and the things he said, they remembered that Jesus did not claim to be acting for himself alone, as a single human being. In his own words, but, more importantly, in the whole meaning of his life, he tried to tell them that his love for them, in all its human reality, was the way God loved them, was God loving them. In the light of his death and resurrection, they came
to understand that Jesus' love for them was the complete revelation of who God is and the continued presence of that love in their midst.

In these latter times, when we hear the story of the resurrection, we are challenged to make it a reality in our own lives. This can only happen if we let the risen Lord touch the hope and longing of our own lives, the pain of our suffering, our fear of death. For only when we let Jesus touch these places do we experience the love that poured itself out for us on the cross so that we would not be afraid. If we let the risen Lord be present us, we, too, can know the faith of Jesus' disciples, and face our lives with the hope and courage that they found in their experience of him.

If, through the eyes of faith, we thus see what the life and death of Jesus means to us -- that in him, in his human love for us, we see God -- then perhaps we begin to understand what the resurrection means. For then the resurrection is not just an event apart from Christ's life, something added on to a life that ended on the cross. No, if the human life of Jesus is the gift of God's love for us, the gift of God's very self, then the resurrection is the seal and culmination of that gift, the last and greatest gift of love. For in the resurrection, all that Jesus means to give to us in his life is given to us again, completely: this time, no more to die; this time, to be with us forever.