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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's sermon, preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www.newlifeithaca.org. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

The reading of the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 20, Verses 19 through 31. Please stand if you're able.

00:54

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the door is being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you. When he said this, he showed them his hands in his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them, Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,

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received the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. Wait. They are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. Now Thomas, one of the twelve called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord. But he said to them, Unless I see in his hands the marks of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails,

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and placed my hand into his side, I will never believe. Eight days later, the disciples were inside again and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you. And then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here and see my hands and put out your hand and place it on my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe. Thomas answered him, My Lord and my God. Jesus said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me?

02:22

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Now Jesus had many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. The Gospel of the Lord.

02:46

Couple of weeks ago I got a text from a pastor friend of mine and the text was a YouTube link and he said, have you seen this? So I clicked on the link and immediately, very quickly saw the reason why he was sending it to me. The video was an hour and fifty minute long YouTube video. The title was Why I Left Christianity with Rhett McLaughlin.

03:16

Now, the reason why I sent it to me was because this person, Rhett McLaughlin, is a close friend of mine. And you may not know who that is, those who are younger than me and older than my kids probably have heard of Rhett and Link. They are YouTube stars. have probably one of the most popular shows on YouTube called Good Mythical Morning. And so.

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And I also happened to be good friends of mine. were in college together. We were roommates for a time. We were in each other's weddings. So he sends me this link. know, Rhett was appearing on this show. And I really didn't know. I'd never heard of the author, the presenter of the show before. So I didn't think much of it. And so I watched the show. It took me a little bit because it's very long. But once I was finished watching it, I texted my friend back. You know, he didn't say anything in there that I haven't heard before. No big deal.

04:11

And the reason why is because Rhett and Leek were known to be, pretty famously known to be evangelical Christians who were in the Los Angeles Hollywood sphere. They had this

show and it was kind of an open secret that they were Christians. In fact, they were more than that. were in Christian ministry for a couple of years. They were on staff with crew. And I went to college with these guys. We were very strong believers. We encouraged each other. We held each other together.

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about three or four years ago, they started relaying on their podcast, which they called Good Mythical Mor- uh, sorry, it's called Ear Biscuits. And on the podcast, they began to tell their story of deconversion, or what is sometimes called deconstruction. And I did not find out about it by listening to the podcast, because we had been reconnecting and we had been talking, a group of us that were in college together doing-

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We started doing weekly Zooms during the pandemic, which a lot of people did. We started reconnecting by having a yearly trip together, and we still do. fact, you can go look on my office wall and see a picture of us on our last trip over Labor Day weekend. So I wasn't surprised by it when I heard the story. And I've been listening to their story over the past few years as they give updates about their progress through deconversion and deconstruction. So when I watched this YouTube video, I said to myself,

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He's not saying anything that he hasn't been saying for the past two or three years. This is no big deal. I thought it was a nothing burger. Why is he sending me this? So that's what I texted to him back. But then last week, I found out that I had grossly underestimated the importance of this video. So I was looking at YouTube, watching some stuff again, and a video came across. And this video was a response to that other video. And I thought, huh.

06:02

Somebody's making a video responding. And if you're not familiar with how things go on YouTube and TikTok and other places, sometimes people will make videos, especially in the areas of politics and religion, and then others will respond to it. The reason why this response, though, got my attention was because of the person who was responding. This

was a 40-minute long response video, and the main person responding was a guy named William Lane Craig. Now, if you've never heard of William Lane Craig, Hannah nodded her head.

06:31

He is one of the preeminent Christian philosophers in the world. In fact, he along with J.P. Moreland invented the modern discipline of Christian philosophy and William Lane Craig is widely considered to be one of the greatest Christian apologists alive today and he spent 40 minutes going through this video. The host of the show that he appeared on was Sean McDowell who is Josh McDowell's son. Josh McDowell who wrote one of the most popular

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And most use apologetics textbooks called evidence that demands a verdict. So these guys are heavyweights, right? This is Christian apologetics royalty here and they're spending 40 minutes talking about my friend's little appearance. So I began to think this is maybe he's not a little appearance. I texted Rhett and I said, hey, did you know that William Lane Craig did a response video? And he said, yeah. In fact, almost every important or upcoming

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Christian apologists made a response video. He sent me a video link and it was a compilation of all these videos, 12 different videos, 12 different podcasts that responded to what he said. And so said, this guy, I'd never heard of him before, that an interviewed rep, his name is Alex O'Connor, never heard of him before, but that one video had over two million views. And apparently this guy is a very well known

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podcaster and presenter, a former Christian himself, he interviews people and talks about stories of deconversion, deconstruction, and atheism. And so this was actually quite a big deal. I had no idea, even though I felt he hadn't said anything new. So everybody felt like they needed to respond to it. And when I looked at those responses, I didn't watch all those

videos, I did watch the one compilation, that was helpful. I really wasn't all that impressed with the way they responded.

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I felt that they kind of created bullet points of things to counteract and they were really talking at him or about him and not with him. One of the things that I've always been disappointed by ever since their first podcast came out and people started doing this is I felt that people were trying to make a name for themselves by presenting content that argues against what they were saying. And of course, me as a friend, I felt that to be a little bit, well.

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make of it what you will, trying to promote yourself off of something like that. And I will say that although all those responses, I found them to be wanting a bit, I still continue to wrestle with this idea in general. And as we come to the text today, I think we find somebody who is analogous to the modern,

09:23

Deconversion deconstruction person. I think we find somebody in Thomas who's asking hard questions and as I thought about this text and I thought about this experience with my buddy as I thought about my own experience as I've shared with you before that over the past few years I've been struggling with some doubts like doubts come into my mind and I wrestled with them. It started about six years ago. I think I started having these sort of existential crises

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You know, some of them were as intense as a panic attack. Just thinking about things like the reality of hell and suffering and what if God doesn't exist. And so I've had to wrestle through those things and I just want to set you at ease. This is not a sermon about how I've deconverted, okay? I have not. In fact, quite the opposite. I feel like I've wrestled through those things and have come to some, come to an answer, at least for me, that has been very helpful. But because my friends, my very close friends whom I love very much,

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have been through this process and because I'm in a town here in Ithaca where I'm constantly having these conversations, I'm having conversations with people about the existence of God, the reality of Christ and the resurrection and because I myself have been wrestling through these things, I've looked into it quite a lot, I've read quite a lot, I've thought about it quite a bit, I did a sermon series two falls ago on these topics, we talked about them in Sunday school classes, I've spent a lot of time thinking about it and so

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As I came to this interview and I came to this text today, I wanted to have a little bit of a different approach to this text about Thomas. If you've been at New Life as long as I've been here, which has been three years now, you've heard me preach on this text twice before because I do it every Easter. And the way I've approached it the last two years is to approach it as someone, Thomas is someone who's hurting. He's experienced trauma and he has doubts because of his trauma. He has doubts because

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He has experienced church hurt, as it's called today. The church has hurt him and he's having trouble believing for that reason. And I think that is true. That's definitely a part of this text. And if you want to hear a sermon like that, you can go on the internet and you can listen to one on our website. But today, I want to focus more on this idea of doubt and questioning and the topic of deconversion, because I think this text has something to say to this. Now, you may not know who Red is. You may not care. That's fine.

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guarantee you know someone who's been through the process of deconversion. There are tens of millions of people in this country and in other countries that used to be Christians and have been through the process of questioning, doubting for various reasons, and now they would say they no longer identify as Christians. And so I think this is a very relevant thing to think through because we know someone and perhaps we ourselves are in the midst of this process.

12:15

The thing that I think Thomas brings to us, and I don't have this typical three-point sermon today, I mean I do have a flow, but the thing that I think Thomas presents to us today is he is kind of a model doubter, and he presents to us the kind of the way we should move through this as people. So what do we see in Thomas? We see in Thomas, first of all, the first thing I want you to see is I want you to see in Thomas

12:45

we see someone who is courageous enough to express what other people are thinking. The first thing is Thomas is not the only one who's doubting, he's just the one who is able to express it. We know that the other disciples were doubting. John himself alludes to it. We know that on Easter morning when the women came and told the disciples what they had seen and heard, they dismissed it as an idle tale.

13:12

We see here in this text beginning in verse 19, the doors were locked because they are afraid, which is a symbol, a sign of doubt and fear. And then the first thing that Jesus does is he shows them his hands and side. In other words, he does exactly the same thing he does for Thomas. Because they're doubting too. Luke says it more explicitly in the Ascension narrative of Luke and in Acts. He says some were doubting, even 40 days later after they'd seen Jesus,

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They'd spent 40 days with him, he'd performed other miracles. There's some still doubting. So Thomas is not the only apostle who's doubting, but he is the one who is courageous enough to express those doubts. He's courageous enough to ask those questions. And so because of that, I think we see that having questions, having doubts is normal. It's normal. And one of the things that Rhett was expressing in his interview,

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that I think all those responders missed because they treated it as if he was presenting points to be argued against and not his story was his experience growing up and being disciplined in the 80s and 90s in the evangelical, you know, we were in the South, we both grew up in the South, but kind of fundamentalistic church in those days. And although Rhett was raised Baptist and I was raised Pentecostal and those are very different,

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We still had a very similar outlook that was being taught to us and that was this, that doubting was not allowed. That you could not question things. If you came around asking questions say about science or evolution or whatever, you would be looked at as someone who's about to fall away. You could not doubt, you could not ask questions, you had to have a sense of certainty. Rhett talked about that in his interview there. And one of things that happened for him in his experience

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is because this is how Christianity was formed into him that you cannot have uncertainty it is not a part of the Christian faith to have doubts that when he began to ask questions and he began to explore some things like for him it was evolution as soon as he pulled out that Jenga piece boom it all fell and I think he realizes and I would say too that what would have happened if he and myself had been disciplined in a way

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that I just said to those kids just now, it is okay to doubt, it is okay to ask questions, in fact it is normal, it is a Christian, it is a way for Christians to process their life and their faith. And so that's the first thing, the second thing I want to say, is that doubting is normal. Having questions is normal. In fact, Jesus dignifies the doubter, he dignifies the questioner.

16:02

I've made this point over the years and you may have heard it before, but Jesus does not come in guns blazing. He does not come in castigating Thomas. He does not come in rebuking him, even though the other disciples probably were thinking it. He comes in immediately and gives him exactly what he asked for. Here Thomas, here I am. Put your

finger in, just like you asked. Now believe. And the reason why I say he dignifies the doubter is because after that,

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His spirit, the spirit of the living God caused that change, flipped that switch in Thomas, and he was the first person to ever say, my Lord and my God. He was the first person to confess that this man was, this risen Lord was the God of the universe. He dignifies the doubter. And so this is why I think that we need to have this as a part of our thinking about Christianity and faith and discipleship.

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that questions are welcome. Questions are welcome. And so I see the process that Rhett went through is a lot like Thomas. He's asking questions. And I fear that because of the way that we were raised and because maybe he didn't have anyone around him at the time, he didn't have anyone to really push against that and help him through that process.

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The reason why I think Thomas is asking questions and it's normal to ask questions and have doubts in Christianity is because actually if you think about it we're asked to believe some pretty crazy stuff. Right? If you're a non-Christian you've never been in a church before, you've never been a part of the Christian faith ever before. And you heard the stuff we believe. Like after the sermon is over we're going to stand up and confess, I believe in God the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth.

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If you have been to church, you know that is something very normal, but if you stop and think about it, it's kind of little bit bonkers. You know? I think what Thomas is doing is he's expressing, you want me to believe what? You want me to believe that this man rose from the dead? I'm going to need to see some proof. I'm going to need to see it. You're going to need to explain this to me. You know? We're asked to believe all sorts of things. We're asked to believe that there is an infinite God who created everything.

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You know, if you were a non-Christian coming in, you knew nothing about Christianity, nothing about the Bible, and you're going to explain it to them. It's like, oh yeah, you we believe that there is an infinite God that created all these things. Oh, okay. What's this God like? What does he look like? He's invisible. We know. We've never seen him. Okay, so how did he create the world? He created the world good. The world is beautiful. How did evil get here? Well...

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We believe there was a serpent and a garden and humanity rebelled against God. What did they do? They must have done something really, really horrible like kill someone or hurt someone really badly. No, they ate a fruit of a tree. Yeah, and everybody fell because of it. I mean, you just start to think of, you start to think of this and it is kind of...

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It is kind of crazy what we are asked to believe as Christians, and I think it's normal for us to ask questions about that. It's normal, I think. You know, for example, like, think about Jesus. Jesus came, Jesus is God's answer to, Jesus is God's answer to redeeming and restoring the world. And so your non-Christian friends say, oh, is he going to come and, you know, create a political movement and really create an army and do some things to change the world? No, he's going to change the world.

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through suffering and service. Which of course is one of the most brilliant things that Jesus ever taught and everybody recognizes it. Atheists, philosophers, all different stripes recognize the brilliance of the idea that the world is changed through suffering and service. But if you stop to think about it for a second, is it, isn't it, it doesn't make much sense. How can you conquer evil and death through suffering and service? We believe it's true. But

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If you think of it outside the context of the Christian faith, it is kind of different. That Jesus would come and he would live a perfect life, that he was born of a virgin, that he would die

on the cross, that he would be raised again, you know? And after he was raised again, he ascended into heaven. You're non-Christian, friend. What's heaven like? Well, there's a lot of dead people there and a hundred billion angels. What are angels like? Are they beautiful beings of light, you know, like we see in classical art?

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No, they have a lot of wings and a bunch of eyes and they're really scary looking. My point is this. We may be used to Christian belief, we may be used to a lot of things that we talk about, but they are hard to believe. In fact, Paul talks about this in Corinthians. Paul talks about the fact that to Greeks, this is foolishness.

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It's foolishness to the Greeks. He talks about the cross and it being foolishness to the Greeks. And these things are foolishness in a lot of ways. And so I think it's natural that we would ask questions and have doubts. It's quite normal that we want to walk through these things and have someone explain them to us. And we have to recognize that these things are hard to believe sometimes. So where do we go from there? We have Thomas, we have his doubts, we have his questions.

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which I'm arguing are reasonable. Where do we go from there? Well, we go from there to Jesus presenting his body, Jesus presenting his wounds. He gives Thomas what he's asking for. He gives him the solution that he's looking for. And what I want to posit here is something that I've been wrestling with, I've been working through doubts and questions and thinking about kind of the fundamental questions of the existence of God and so forth.

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The thing I keep coming back to is the universe. The size of it and the power of it. I've been thinking about this for a while. Maybe you've heard me talk about it some. But let's just think about the universe itself. Over the past 200 or 300 years, we've been able to discover many things about the visible, the known universe. We've been able to discover its size, its magnitude. But let's just start with our own sun. Let's think about the power.

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in our own sun. How much power is contained or emitted by the sun? The sun, in its emitted energy, in its emitted light, emits about 4,000 trillion trillion watts. That's 40 trillion trillion hundred watt light bulbs. Every second. That is a very large number. 10 to the 26th power.

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We can hear the number, but can our brains even comprehend what 10 to the 26th power is? What it looks like. It is a very large number. And now take that number and multiply it by what we think are the amount of stars in the universe, which is about a hundred billion trillions, so 10 to the 21st power, stars in the known universe. Multiply those two together, if you let me do a little math. It's about 10 to the 45th.

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Watts. Can we even comprehend what 10 to the 45th power is? It's huge. It borders practically on infinity. Practically, for all intents and purposes, is infinity. If we think about the size of the universe, which we estimate to be about 100 billion light years across, can you imagine how far 100 billion light years are?

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I can tell you the number, you can know what a light year is, you know what a hundred billion is, but can we even fathom how far that is, how vast it is? It is so large, it borders on infinitude. And so my point is this, we have a universe that we can observe, that we can see, that has enormous power, bordering on infinity, has enormous size, bordering on infinity, and so to make the jump between we...

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see a universe and that's crazy to think about those sizes and those emits power and by the way I haven't even that's just the power that stars emit we haven't even gotten to the power containing planets we haven't talked about the gravitational forces you add all this up

together and it is an immense amount of power it's not that much of a leap to go from this the nearly infinite size of this universe to believing in an infinite God mentally it's just not that much of a leap

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You know, I think it is equally plausible if you, if we would argue that the universe is nearly infinite and has no source and no beginning, okay, which is one way to look at it, or we believe in a God who is infinite and has no source and no beginning, I don't see logically very little difference between the two. And so then if we take it a step further, if you'll let me. And that is when we observe the fine tuning of the universe.

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There's a quote in the bulletin here from Stephen Hawking. Stephen Hawking was not a believer. But Stephen Hawking, as he observed the created universe, he said this. He said, would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun just this way, except as an act of God who intended to create beings like us. In fact, if one considers the constants and laws that have emerged,

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The odds against a universe that has produced life like ours are immense. In other words, we shouldn't be here. Why did the universe start out with so nearly the critical rate of expansion that separates models that re-collapse from those who go on expanding forever? That even now, 10,000 million years later, it is still expanding at nearly the same critical rate. If that rate of expansion, one second after the Big Bang, had been smaller,

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by even one part in 100,000 million million, that's a very small decimal, the universe would have collapsed before it ever reached its present size. In other words, the universe didn't figure this out over time. It was fine-tuned from the very beginning. And we put on top of that the improbability of life existing as we have on this planet, animals, the plants, and everything existing by mere chance. And we have another set of improbabilities that borders on

27:03

incredulity. So I would argue that if we consider the immensity and the power of the universe beside belief in God and add to it that it was fine-tuned the way it was, that the existence of life is so hard to explain without someone infinite, eternal and unchangeable creating it all, I would say it tips the scales in favor of being a theist, being the more probable solution to what we see and what we hear.

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So what I would argue is that the discoveries that we've been able to make over the past two, three hundred years about the universe, about science, chemistry and physics, they are Christ's wounds being presented to us. They are what, in effect, what Thomas is being asked to reach out and touch are these things. David wrote this three thousand years ago. He said that heavens declare the glory of God.

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and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. And now we know just how true that is. We know just how true that is. The more we learn about this world, the more we learn about the universe, we see how much more it displays the handiwork of a creator. There's no, there's hardly any rational way to explain it. And so as I've coming through my period of doubt and through my period of wrestling,

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I've been able to more and more land my anchor on what I've just been describing to you. What we can observe and what we can see, what we know about this created world and this universe, it demonstrates that there had to have been an intelligent, infinite being that created it all. And that, I think, is what the wounds of Christ extended to us that we may reach out and touch are for us. And so, coming back to Thomas, coming back to our doubts,

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and coming back to deconstruction, so to speak. No, asking questions I've argued is normal. What do we do with those questions? I would say we hear the voice of Jesus saying, reach out and touch my creation. Reach out and touch the stars. Reach out and see what I have provided for you and what scientific discovery has revealed about it. Reach out and touch it. And if we...

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If we reach out and we see that these are God's handiwork, these are the things that God has given us at the exact time when doubts in God and atheism is on the rise and questions being given, the very same movement has produced proofs that I think can really aid us in our faith. So as we reach out and touch His creation, as we reach out and see the evidence that is before us and understand that it is just like Thomas

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being presented with the wounds in the body of Christ, we can't do the next step. Jesus then says, stop disbelieving and believe. This is what takes a work of the Holy Spirit. This takes the Spirit working in us and working in our friends and our family after we have considered these things, after we've reached out and seen with the questions of science and apologetics and cosmology and all the rest.

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We must still have that switch flipped on. And my prayer is that as we do that, as we wrestle with our own questions, and as we do reach out with our human understanding to try to understand these things, that the Spirit would come and flip that switch. That the Spirit would come and turn that switch on so that we can stop disbelieving and believe. And I think that He's done that for me. And I hope that one day He does it for my friend Rhett and Link.

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And for anyone else who's struggling and doubting, I pray that we would be able to reach out our hands, we'd be able to see the evidence that God has given us in His creation, and

that the Holy Spirit, by His power, would cause us to believe and have faith in Him. Let's pray.

31:18

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