

Possibilities

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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In Jesus Christ God has promised to every human being a new horizon of possibilities—new life into which each of us is called to grow in our own way and ultimately a new world freed from all enmity, a world of love. To be a Christian means that new possibilities are defined by that promise, not by any past experience, however devastating.

— Miroslav Volf, [The End of Memory](#)

I have many conversations with people who find it difficult to believe or people who barely believe or people who want to believe but can't or people who are embarrassed to believe or people who look down in condescension at those who believe or people who are just bewildered that anyone could believe in something like God or resurrection or hope or *any* kind of future that is radically dissimilar to the present. This is the shape of our life and imagination in the post-Christian West.

For much of my life, I suspect that I have implicitly thought of words like "faith" and "religion" and "belief" in terms and categories something akin to a construction project. We assemble the doctrines and the arguments, we marshal the biblical texts for support, we fashion a life of good works, we chisel away at our characters to produce the fruit that we are convinced God (and others) want from us, and then, at the end of it all, after the foundation has properly been laid, after all the bricks have been set in place, after the walls have been painted and prettied up, we are left with a nice shiny object that can be described as "a person of faith" or "a faith of their own" or "a believer" or "a Christian."

Lately, though, I have been wondering if faith is, in the end, nothing more or less than a decision about possibility. What do we think is *possible* for us? For the world? For our neighbours? For God?

For many, what's possible is largely circumscribed by what is observable. We *do* not and *cannot* see things like "God" and "eternity" and "*shalom*" and "forgiveness" and "salvation"—at least not to the degree that we would like to or to the extent that we

think we should. So we relegate these words to the categories of “pie-in-the-sky” or “wishful thinking” or “idealistic nonsense.” These are nothing more than the therapeutic fictions that some apparently require to get themselves through the day in a world that cares nothing for our preferences, a world that is, at rock bottom, indifferent to the hopes and fears of human beings.

It is *impossible*, for many in the postmodern, post-Christian West, that such words should point to anything that is finally true about our world or the human predicament.

A few weeks ago, I spent a morning in the psych ward with a person who is struggling immensely with the difficulty of life, with thoughts of suicide, with rage and despair, with the soul-crushing meaningless nature of the suffering they have experienced over long decades. They have experienced the pain of lost children, of all manner of abuse, of addiction, of poverty and neglect... They have been kicked around by life, by circumstances, by other human beings for long decades, and they are at the point where they simply can't take it any more. “I feel like I'm in a dark, narrow pit,” this person said, “and there is no escape. I try to climb out but the walls are slippery and I can't grab on to anything. I can barely see the light at the top any more... I just keep groping and scratching at the walls, but I can't ever get any closer to the light.”

What does one say? We sat in silence for a while. We prayed. We laughed out loud when one of the other patients walked by the door of the room and loudly burped and farted... Such is the nature of the holy moments that are ours to steward in this screwed up world.

At the end of our visit, this person told me that the only thing that kept them going in the face of all this was the hope that there was something better out there. That this black, slimy pit whose walls they could not scale, was not the last word on their story. And what could I say but, “yes, this is my hope, too... for you, for all of us... ”

What else can any of us say—those of us who use words like “believer” and “person of faith” and “Christian” to describe ourselves? What else can we do but continue to rehearse this time-worn conviction, both ragged and sure, that we have not been left as orphans—that the Maker of heaven and earth has come for us, comes for us still, and will one day come in power and grace and truth to show us what is, finally, possible for us and for this world that he has made?

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