

Hope lets go

To grow into Christ's likeness is to step away from power and toward failure.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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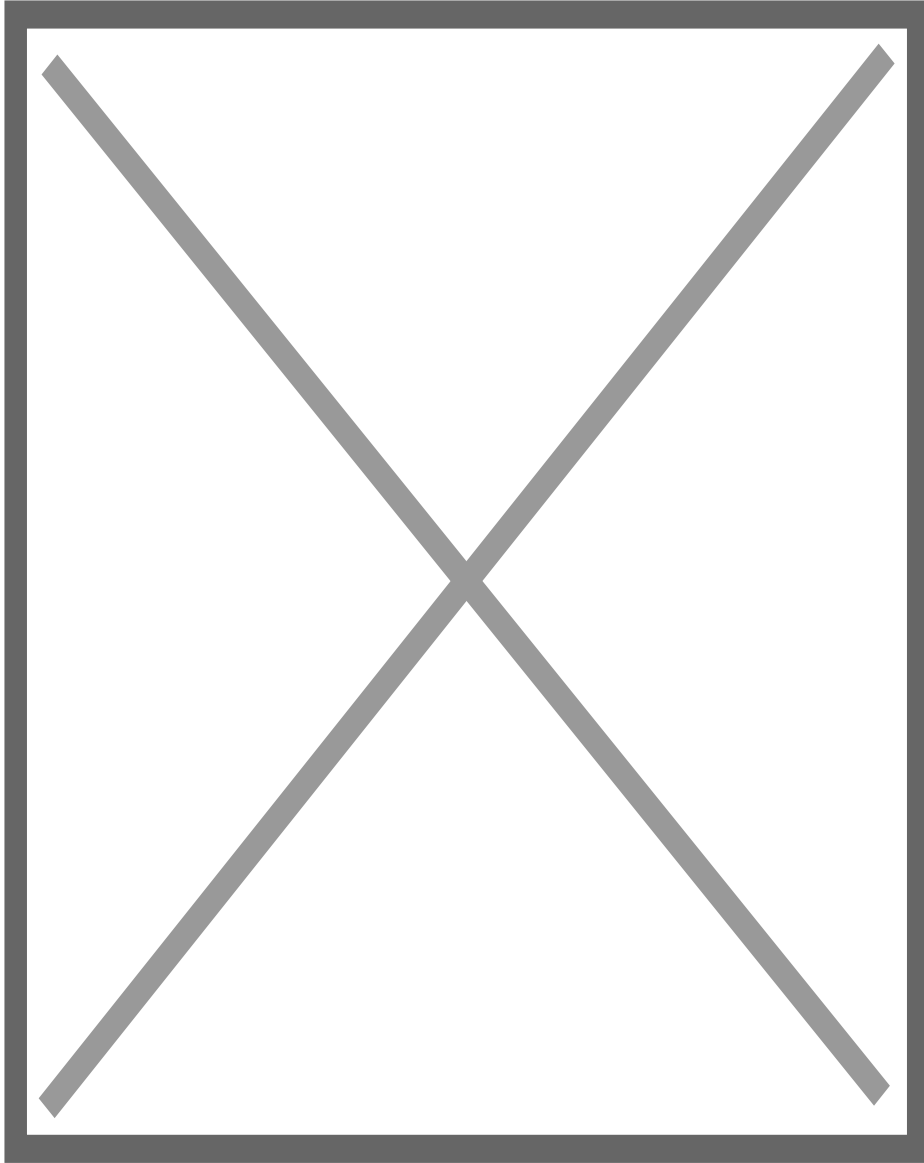


Illustration by Mary Haasdyk Vooy's

Humans love a good story. More than that, we like a good story to live by. Whether that is the American dream, the World War II myth of “Britain alone,” or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, many of us adore a story that tells us who we were or are and who we can become. One might even call this era the age of narrative: a time when politicians, religious leaders, and influencers alike simply must deploy story in order to motivate—and, so often,

to sell things—or else they become irrelevant.

Stories also fail us. They can become hollow, losing traction as ways of understanding a life or a nation. They can become damaging. The stories told by someone like Donald Trump cause division and potentially foster violence. And some versions of the gospel story can not only inspire but also create victims and survivors.

What part in the call to live a flourishing life is played by the stories we live by? Stories matter to Christians, whether they be parables told by Jesus or the story of salvation itself. I know I live by stories and am a sucker for them. I want not only to tell and inhabit the Christian story better but also to understand why, despite their promise and seeming truth, the stories we live by can mess any of us up.

A helpful place to start is cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism." She describes this as a situation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." For Berlant, exhibit A is the American dream. It is an optimistic, off-the-shelf narrative Americans can live by which suggests that anyone, with sufficient vim, can go from rags to riches. It implies that success could happen to anyone because we are all the same. What matters is how we overcome disadvantages or are inspired by others' examples to achieve success. It is a motivational film plot writ large.

But the dream is cruel, because it sets up those who believe in it to fail. While it gives its adherents a story to live by, when a person fails, it is always their fault: they simply have not complied sufficiently with the dream's requirements. The very thing which is attractive about the story—its promise of a better life if only we work hard enough—becomes an obstacle to human flourishing.

Where does the Christian story of salvation sit within this picture of cruel optimism? Well, I think there are modes of Christianity which are essentially sentimentalized optimism. These are cargo cult or prosperity gospel Christianities, in which the relationship between adherent, tradition, and God is essentially transactional: *If I offer you my life, my soul, my tithe, and my holy commitment, then I will be blessed with long life, prosperity, and happiness.* I doubt there is any tradition of Christianity which is immune from transactional pressures. Any adherent can come to believe that if they only pray harder or stick to a (usually) narrow and demanding devotional path, then they will be blessed mightily with all good things.

Nonetheless, it is tempting to respond to Berlant's picture by suggesting that the Christian faith is grounded in hope rather than in optimism. Is that a cheap move? I suspect Berlant would be inclined to parse both categories, claiming that the language of hope presents a sophisticated sublimation or powerful translation of what is really optimism. Yet I do think my experience of faith is based not on optimism but on hope. Hope is a work of exposure and letting go. It entails placing one's faith in the trustworthy big story that is also a small story: the story of the other who reveals themselves to be the gift and life and being of the world, shown forth in the life of a no-note peasant born in an outhouse in an irrelevant part of what was then the world's greatest empire.

What makes this work of hope and trust exhilarating and truthful is the way its invitation to let go leads away from the promise of success, achievement, or self-actualization, even of goodness and loveliness. To grow into Christ's likeness is to step toward failure and the stripping away of power. Christianity reveals that along the way of death is the way of life. It is not sentimental. That is the promissory nature of hope: it is the promise of not pleasure or the good life but a progressive exposure to God's reality. And it is love—not defined as a romantic or sentimental or instrumental category but demonstrated in God's solidarity with the castoff and invitation to us to stand with them, too.

What I think it comes down to is finding joy in not having to achieve or be anything more than the catastrophe and mess and less-than-virtuous person one actually is. The only level of wisdom required is to know that one is unwise and foolish and cannot achieve the completeness of the complete person—the good person or the holy

person. For there is only one who is good and one who is holy. There is only one human being, Jesus Christ, and it is okay to be an approximation of him.

Hope works only if it is located in the right place. Its promises are only as good as the one who makes them. When we attempt to live on promises made by a human or an institution, we risk being let down. I know only too well as a Christian that sometimes it can feel as if God lets us down, too. But God is good, and God's promises are, ultimately, reliable. They present something trustworthy in the midst of precarious hope and too much cruel optimism.