

# “Faith and Remembrance”

## The Spirit of Vimy Ridge

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Isaiah 2: 2-5 NRSV

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I never thought I would be up here speaking to you today on this Remembrance Day service. Mostly because I’m nervous about public speaking, but also because, until recently, I never felt super strongly about Remembrance Day. It seemed to me that Remembrance Day glorified war, and the ceremonies and the laying of wreaths by every corporation in town seemed mostly an advertising opportunity.

But my skeptical view was changed this past winter when I was hired as a guide at the Vimy Ridge Canadian Memorial and the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial in France.



I arrived in early January. I was joined by 15 other Canadian students from all across the country — from New Brunswick to British Columbia. We had two weeks of intensive training. During the first week we learned the story of Vimy Ridge from two historians flown in from Canada, and the next week we were taught the operations and practiced giving tours.

I’d seen pictures of the monument, and the rest of my family who saw it a few years ago told me about it. But nothing beats actually being there. On our first day, we were driven to the memorial sites.

But that morning it was so foggy that you couldn’t see 5 feet in front of you. I knew the monument had to be close, but I couldn’t see anything.

During our lunch break, I went outside, and there it was, floating out of the mist; brilliantly white, standing tall on Hill 145, surrounded by a preserved battle ground.

I don’t know how much you know about the history of the monument, but I can tell you this: God definitely had a part in it.

The design for the monument



was a competition and the winner, the architect Walter Seymour Allward, said that the inspiration for the design came to him in a dream. He dreamed of the dead rising and coming to Canada's aid. At first, they didn't want to put the monument on the ridge — but upon seeing Allward's design, they knew it *had* to be on the ridge. It took eleven years to build the monument. Allward, a perfectionist, was heavily involved in its creation. After searching for two years, he finally found the limestone to build the monument in an abandoned Roman mine in Croatia.

The two pylons represent Canada and France united to fight for a common goal. It is said that the blue sky between the pylons is the ocean that separates these two great nations. At the highest point is Peace, and across from it is Justice. Arranged below them are other figures representing Truth, Knowledge, Gallantry and Sympathy. Around these figures are the shields of Canada, Britain and France. On the outside of the pylons stands the Cross.

In the centre, at the base, the Spirit of



Sacrifice throws the torch to his comrades.

The monument shift is 3 hours long, and so I spent a lot of time walking around the monument. I studied every sculpture and the names of the 11,285 Canadians who were killed in France and whose final resting places are unknown.

Some places and spaces feel sacred, and it is hard to describe how incredibly sacred this place is. You feel the presence of God. I was often moved to pray in that place. The monument in no way glorifies war, like I had feared it would ... you can't help but feel the loss and the grief. Standing on the monument and looking out onto the preserved battlefield I could imagine the young men — most of



whom were my age—who had fought and died there. It would have been their first time in France as well.

The battle for Vimy Ridge began at 5:30 a.m. on April 9, 1917. It was the first time all four Canadian divisions fought on a united front. Most objectives were taken on schedule, and by afternoon most of the ridge was captured — except for Hill 145 or ‘The Pimple’, a high point at the North end of the ridge, where defenders held out until April 12.

By April 12, the Canadians had taken all of their objectives, achieving what many allies had tried to do since the beginning of the Great War. This victory came at a high cost: 3,598 Canadians lost their lives, and 7,000 were wounded during the four-day battle. April 9, 1917 remains the bloodiest day in Canadian military history. In recognition of the Canadian sacrifice, the French government granted use of the land for the Memorial and battlefield site to the people of Canada “freely and for all time.”

The guides spend 60% of their time at Vimy and 40% at Beaumont-Hamel (BH). I had heard stories about Vimy, but BH was new to me. And while the history of Vimy is a story of sacrifice and triumph, the history of BH is a tragedy.



On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916, the first day of the battle of the Somme, the Newfoundland Regiment of 800 men began their advance. The next day only 68 were able to answer the roll, with more than 700 killed, wounded or missing. The dead

included 14 sets of brothers, including four lieutenants from the Ayre family of St. John's.

It was the women of Newfoundland, the mothers, the widows, and the sisters who raised money to buy the 74-acres of land. The effects of this battle and the Great War on a dominion of 240,000 was devastating. Newfoundland reverted to colony status after the war – remember it wasn't part of Canada yet. The devastation of the loss of these young men and others who returned with illness and serious injuries is part of the reason that Newfoundland joined Canada in 1948.

Every morning at Vimy Ridge, one of the guides does the Caribou walk where we do a full round of the site. It was one of my favourite tasks, and one cannot help but feel the sacredness of the site ... treading silently on the path through the trenches with the fog nipping at your heels, or stepping out of the front-line trench and taking the same path as those men



did towards the 'danger tree' where the majority of them perished. It makes even a skeptic like me re-evaluate the meaning of remembrance.

I have been so moved by these places, but there is nothing quite like being part of the moments when others connect with these sites. A young Canadian high school student came to visit the Vimy monument with her host family, and I was able to help her find the name of a family member etched on the side of the monument. I talked with a retired Canadian couple who made the pilgrimage to the site. I talked and walked with them around the site for nearly two hours, and by the end they felt like friends.

But there was one thing that stood out, something God definitely had a hand in. Mary Mueller, a member of our congregation, emailed me at the beginning of my trip and asked me if I could visit her Uncle Calvin's grave for her. I didn't know where the cemetery was, but I knew that I needed to do this; that I was called to do this. I googled the cemetery and found that it was just on the other side of town. So I borrowed a friend's bike and biked through the huge 7-exit traffic circle. Though I got a bit lost, I made it. The path to the cemetery is barely 1 meter wide and lies between two houses, so if you didn't know it was there you would never find it. The path led to a small cemetery hidden behind the rows of houses. It didn't take me long to find Calvin Dopson's headstone.



I stayed at his grave for thirty minutes or so. I Face-timed my mom, Pastor Kim, and we prayed for him. I told him that his niece had sent me and had wished she had gotten a chance to meet him. She wished he had just kept his head down a little longer, since he died in April, 1918 near the end of the war. I read 'In Flanders Fields' to him, I signed the visitors book, and left behind a cross on Mary's behalf.

I was supposed to be at Vimy Ridge until mid-May, but Covid had other plans. Still, in the 2 months I was there, I managed to visit seven countries. But it wasn't the magnificent French pastries or the incredible Belgian chocolate that I will remember for years to come. It will be the quiet moments when I felt closest to God and so incredibly thankful. We cannot

forget these Canadians and those we lost. So I will remember. We will remember.