

“No Man's Land”

November 7th, 2021 Remembrance Sunday
Luke 24:13-35

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The term “no man's land” became widely used in World War I, though it existed before; even dating back to the 1300's. Before WWI it was a desolate, uninhabited place outside of the city, outside the rule of the local lord. In France in 1914 it became that space between enemy trenches. By the end of WWI and into WWII, when tanks came onto the battlefield, no man's land ceased to be such a presence. But when you think of WWI, trenches and no man's land are some of the first things that come to mind.



No man's land is that space not occupied by anyone. There were sometimes fragments of what used to be in that place before the war began, blown up trees or splintered barn boards, but mostly for the soldier in France — whether English, Canadian, French or German — what was before them would have been unrecognizable and nearly impossible to imagine ever going back to anything pastoral, peaceful or good.

- It was an ugly space, filled with craters, along with some dead soldiers who never made it across.
- It was also a dangerous space: if you risked going out there you were an easy target for the enemy. No matter how careful and controlled you tried to be, at any moment you might step in the wrong place and trigger the explosion of an undetonated land mine.
- It was a place you became stuck in. The point was to make progress and to gain ground, but often in that so-called Great War both sides remained stuck — unable to advance and not willing to retreat.
- When I visited Vimy Ridge I was amazed at how close the trenches were together. The distance between the opposing trenches was at most

about 100 yards—or the length of a football field— though they could be shorter, even as short as 10 yards. You really could see the other side. But getting to the other side was another story.

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If I use the acronym PTSD my guess is that almost all of you would know what it means, and most of you likely know what it stands for: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. If we were to play an association game — “What do you think of when I say PTSD?” I would be willing to bet that images of soldiers and war and veterans would jump immediately to mind. Now given that this is our Remembrance service and we have just observed a minute of silence for those who have fallen in the first and second World Wars, Korea, Afghanistan and other combat and peace-keeping missions — you are already viewing PTSD through that lens. But even on a more normal Sunday my guess is that association with war and vets would still be front of mind.

There is good reason for that. Most of what we know today about trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder comes from studying veterans who returned from war. You probably knew that. But I bet you'd be surprised at when PTSD was finally recognized. It was officially recognized as medical disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. It's not that they didn't know there was something going on. When vets came home and had horrendous nightmares or found themselves overreacting to fireworks or a car backfiring — they knew it was from what was experienced in the wars. One term used was Shell-Shock, another was Battle Fatigue. But even with those words they didn't fully understand what was happening to them. When someone's symptoms didn't go away, they were diagnosed with depression or alcoholism or another mental disorder, but they didn't understand how the effects of trauma linger and manifest nor how to effectively treat it.

PTSD is the point at which a trauma response becomes clinical — where medical intervention is required. Trauma does not refer to the event itself, but rather to a person's response to an event. There are many definitions of trauma but one I liked comes from Rev. Diane Strickland who is a traumatologist who has preached at this church during our pandemic time.

She writes “*Trauma is our response to a devastating or disturbing event that overwhelms our capacity to cope, manifesting problematic cognitive, physical,*

emotional, behavioural and spiritual symptoms that are temporary and/or long-term.”

So trauma is a response to a devastating, disturbing event. There is a big sense that you can't cope, it's overwhelming. And this trauma response is felt physically: like with panic attacks. It's felt emotionally like through a burst of anger or fear. It can affect your behaviour in socially unacceptable ways or in socially acceptable ways like control and perfectionism. It can affect your faith. Really trauma affects our whole being. Though the violent or disturbing event has a beginning, a middle and an end, the trauma response lingers on. You can wake up from a horrible nightmare or something like a dog barking that will trigger you and take you right back to the event to that point that you are *not remembering* the event — you are *reliving* the event. Past, present and future cease to be fixed entities.

Lt.-Gen Romeo Dallaire is probably the face of PTSD for Canadians. He has still not recovered from his time as the UN peacekeeping commander in Rwanda in 1994. Though he kept warning the world of what was about to happen, no one came to help. His soldiers who were trained to protect were told not to intervene as up to a million people of the Tutsi minority were killed over the course of 100 days — mostly with machetes. He remembers a few years after returning from Rwanda being at a market in the old part of Quebec City. The “sweet, humid smell” of fruit and vegetables stacked up high brought the past back ... all of a sudden he was reliving a horrifying experience in a Rwandan market. In Quebec City Dallaire found himself running to his vehicle in a panic. In 2016 his memoir *Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD* came out. Dallaire said it took the Canadian military 2 decades to begin to understand what was happening to those who came back from Rwanda and other missions – we're talking 2015.

But you don't have to have witnessed genocide to have experienced trauma. A Canadian psychological association report in 2008 said that 76% of Canadians had had at least one (some have had more) traumatic experience and 10% of Canadians meet the criteria for PTSD. Some groups have had even higher rates of trauma — for example the Recovery Community, the Indigenous community, refugees, first responders all have higher rates of trauma. If you have witnessed, responded to or been in a serious accident, assault, sexual assault, found or witnessed a loved one dying, lived through an ice storm, even if you witnessed events like 911 on the television (and of course now, gone through a global pandemic) then there is a good chance you have experienced trauma. It is possible that you have not gone through these things or not found them to be traumatic, but you certainly know people who have experienced trauma and likely you know people who have PTSD.

We don't know for sure if the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were experiencing a trauma response, but there is a very good chance they were. This scripture reading takes place just days after their teacher and Lord was executed. We don't frequently think about it this way, but at the heart of the Christian story is a traumatic event. Being fully human, the betrayal, the arrest, the torture and the violent death had to have been traumatic for Jesus, and it would have been experienced that way by his followers, whether as a secondary trauma—which is what frequently happens when you witness a traumatic event—or as a primary trauma because they feared for their own lives and safety.

As Christians we jump very quickly from crucifixion to resurrection, but we need to stay a bit in that in-between time—in that no man's land between death and resurrection. The road to Emmaus is that no man's land in between death and resurrection; in between trauma and recovery. Yes, it technically takes place after the resurrection, but it is so soon after the resurrection that it is not yet reality for them. The in-between time is important because it is a reality when you are healing from trauma. It is a messy, chaotic and can feel like a dangerous place, but it is also the place of recovery and restoration, a place where you learn to move into a future that is shaped by the past but not chained to the past.

It's interesting because in a way, the Emmaus story reflects what a trauma response is like. There are two disciples, one is unnamed and the other has a name—Cleopas—but we don't know who he is. He doesn't appear anywhere else before or after this scripture reading. The two are on a road to Emmaus but no one knows where Emmaus is—except that it's outside of Jerusalem. No one has found Emmaus on a map. When the stranger joins them on the road, they don't recognize this stranger as their very own Lord and teacher. So there is a fogginess to the story. This seems fitting because they are in a disorienting and disconnected, no-man's space. They are processing a traumatic event.

When Jesus comes alongside them, I want you to notice that he doesn't start by saying “Surprise! It's me!” and neither does he start talking about the resurrection. He meets them right where they are, in the middle of suffering. Jesus does not dismiss it or deny the reality of their pain. Instead he helps them to see the suffering in a new way. He says to them: “*Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*”

Jesus met those unknown disciples in their no man's land. He didn't rush

them out of it, but met them where they were, in their suffering. “Stay with us” they said to him at the end of the walk. And he did. Jesus stayed until their eyes were opened and they realized they were on the other side, in a whole new place. Those disciples did not go back to being the people they were the week before — you can never go back. Instead, they were forever changed by the trauma, but new life emerged as well in that place.

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How do we recover? How do we help others recover?

I am a big advocate of getting trained, professional help. I have gone to counselling after difficult situations and most of my family has too. It's normal to need the help of a trained counsellor at some point in your life. It doesn't mean you are weak; it means you are human. If you or someone you know seems to be suffering deeper and longer than most, they may have PTSD and then they really do need professional help.

Not everyone is able to access professional help and goodness knows we have shortages in this area. Because of this, but even in addition to professional help, it's important to know that we as a church can do so much to help individuals who have experienced trauma.

It is clear that one of the biggest factors that determine if a person will recover from trauma is having supportive relationships and community around them. That is huge. It can make the difference between an event that is stressful and one that is traumatic. That's also why the pandemic was so devastating, especially to people who live alone, because we couldn't come together and activate those support systems. People who don't have good relationships or support systems are far more vulnerable to trauma.

People who have experienced trauma need someone who will witness their story and receive and believe it. That is why it was so important to have the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada to witness to the pain and the trauma that residential school survivors experienced. We as a church and as Christians can be that community, that witness. The role is to receive the story and simply to stay with them, sometimes just providing safe space. I sure hope we can get back to having a coffee house here a morning or two a week.

It is important to understand trauma lies in the body and not just in our mind. Healing trauma has to involve the body and the mind. Talking about it is very helpful but usually not enough. There are therapies like EMDR — an eye movement therapy—that is effective but needs a professional trained in this. But

there are ways that don't need professional training that can be highly effective. Breathing is one of them. Practicing controlled breathing, like in meditation, is very effective. Using the 2-2-4: Breathe in for 2 seconds, hold your breath for 2 seconds, breathe out for four seconds. If and when you have good breath control you can increase those numbers to 4-4-6. Meditation and yoga have both been clinically found to help in recovery from trauma. When Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, probably the leading specialist in trauma, did experiments he found that yoga had better results treating PTSD than any drug. Other mind-body connecting practices that have been around for centuries also have been proven to bring healing like Tai-Chi, Martial Arts, and humming and chanting. Walking is another way. Giving your body something to do that doesn't take cognitive energy calms the deeper parts of us.

So it's not a surprise to me that these disciples decided in the middle of the confusion and grief to walk. One foot in front of the other. In the middle of a place that can feel like there is no progress, the simple act of walking forward can do so much. These are ways to calm the body and mind.

Through connecting to our bodies and calming that deep part of us, we can begin to believe that something bad happened to us, our reactions were normal and helped us to survive, but we are safe now, it really is in the past. We are shaped by the event but not chained to it forever. We can get across no man's land.

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WWI lasted 4 years and ended 103 years ago. There are no longer any veterans who are still living who served in that war, and yet the effects of that war and even the effects of those no man's lands are still felt today. At Vimy Ridge there are fields where they don't mow the grass, except by using sheep because of possible unexploded land mines.



Verdun has the Zone Rouge which is considered uninhabitable to this day not only because of unexploded ordinance but also because of chemical contamination of arsenic, chlorine and phosgene. The area has been compared to Chernobyl. The effects of war, like trauma, last so much longer than the event. We do well to remember that and to work hard towards peace and reconciliation in this world that has seen way too much trauma.

Yet in the midst of suffering, in the middle of the desolate place there can also be life and renewal. When I think of no man's land I think of mud and ugliness, but then I can also remember the Christmas Eve truce in 1914, when with the singing of Silent Night both sides stopped fighting and met in the middle, exchanging chocolate and playing a game of soccer. I think of the beautiful poppies that were found growing soon after the war in that hopeless looking place. My daughter Anna, who worked at Vimy, also tells me that there are so many bunnies and other wildlife that have taken over in the places where the humans can't go. In the middle of death there is also life.

We are disciples of Jesus, people who hold as part of our story the cross and the empty tomb, but we are also people of that space in between the two. May we be people aware of, but not afraid to be in no man's land. May we be a people willing to stand with others in the gap of their pain knowing we are not alone. You see it's not really no man's land. The Son of man meets us where we are in that space and stays with us as long as it takes for our eyes to open to the new life and healing that is already emerging. Stay with us, Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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