

WHEN THE TRUMPET CALLS

Living Within Earshot of Easter

Text: Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Taps Is Playing

The story is told of a Civil War captain by the name of Robert Ellicombe who, in the summer of 1862, was serving with the Union Army as they squared off against the Confederates near Harrison's Landing, Virginia. As night fell, the Captain is said to have heard the moans of a wounded soldier coming from the no man's land between the opposing forces. Unsure of whether the cries came from a Union or Confederate man, the captain nonetheless felt moved to help. Crawling out under gunfire, he managed to drag the injured man back to the Union lines.

Beneath the lantern light, it became clear that the soldier was Confederate and that he had not survived the ordeal. But there was one more fact that made the Union captain blanche with shock. The dead soldier was his own son. As the story goes, the boy had been studying music in the South when the war broke out. Without telling his father, he had enlisted in the Confederate Army.

According to the tale, the heartbroken father requested permission to give his son a military burial despite his enemy status. His request was only partially granted. His superior officers said he would NOT be permitted to have the services of the normal martial band, but he could select ONE musician to accompany a simple burial. Captain Ellicombe chose a bugler. In the pocket of his musician son's uniform, the Captain had found a scrap of paper on which were scribbled a series of 24 musical notes. He asked for them to be sounded out over the grave -- and this is the tune the bugler played.

[AN OFFSTAGE TRUMPET PLAYS "TAPS"]

While the origins of this tune are now dismissed as legend, this haunting melody we now know as "Taps" has been used to mark the end of day and at military funerals countless times since the 1860's. You can understand why stories have gathered around this tune. There is something about its plaintive notes that touch the heart of anyone acquainted with the melancholy of endings, or the darkness of loss, or the lengthening shadows of your own life.

Taps was played this past Friday at the graveside of a cherished father and great-grandfather of this church who will not be there around the table when the family gathers later today. I could imagine that tune's sweet lament being played over any one of a number of disasters and tragedy's filling the news this week. Represented in this very room are marriages and parent-child relationships and personal dreams over which that bugle call seems to be

playing right now.

I read a blog this week from a man named Derek Miller who confessed he had lost his personal war with the encroaching darkness: **"Here it is,"** he wrote. **"I'm dead, and this is my last post... I died of complications from stage 4 metastatic colorectal cancer. We all knew this was coming."** Miller had been battling the cancer for four years, and had used his blog to record his struggle. He'd asked a friend to post his final words when the nighttime finally overtook him. **"I haven't gone to a better place, or a worse one,"** he writes. **"I haven't gone anyplace, because Derek doesn't exist anymore. As soon as my body stopped functioning, and the neurons in my brain ceased firing, I made a remarkable transformation: from a living organism to a corpse, like a flower or a mouse that didn't make it through a particularly frosty night."** His final words were for his wife: **"I loved you deeply, I loved you, I loved you, I loved you."**

There are times when it feels like the merciless nightfall finally takes us all, doesn't it? We may exult for a day in bright hopes and brilliant inventions and sparkling diversions. But sooner or later the cold dark shadow of sin and death seems to have its way. We watch as the darkness falls over our character, our relationships, our bodies and our public life. Maybe all we can do is fight for awhile, as we await that sad trumpet call that marks the end of hope.

The disciples had to have felt that way. As they stood on that hill outside Jerusalem on Good Friday, watching the sky turning increasingly dark, they must have felt all hope dying with that man they loved upon the cross. I imagine that had one of the Roman soldiers there picked up a horn and begun to play, **"Day is done, Gone the sun, From the lakes, From the hills, From the sky,"** it would have pretty well summed up their despair. But, then, sometimes when it gets really dark, it can be hard to anticipate the light.

Reveille's Coming

The funeral of Winston Churchill took place in Saint Paul's Cathedral. Planned meticulously by the great statesman himself, the funeral included many of the great hymns of the church and the eloquent words of the Anglican liturgy. Following the benediction, a cry rang out from the horn of a lone bugler, positioned high in the dome of Saint Paul's. It was the melody of "Taps," the universal signal that the day is over. But you know there is this last part to the actual lyrics to "TAPS" that is very significant. The first part I've already shared: **Day is done, Gone the sun, From the lakes, From the hills, From the sky.** And THEN it continues: **All is well. Safely rest. God is nigh.** Suddenly, as if that last phrase -- "God is nigh" -- changed everything, a SECOND bugler placed by Churchill's instruction on the OTHER side of the great dome, took up where the first left off and the great cathedral was filled with the

sound of another famous trumpet call. **[AN OFFSTAGE TRUMPET PLAYS "REVEILLE"] "It's time to get up! It's time to get up!! It's time to get up in the morning!!!"**

As Robert Russell observes: "It was Churchill's way of communicating that, while we say 'Good night' here, it's 'Good morning' up there. Now why could he do that?" How could Churchill be so certain about that? Because as imperfect as he was, Churchill had put his hope in the one who is perfect, Jesus Christ, the one who said **"I am the resurrection and the life. And whosoever believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live again"** (John 11:25).

You see, when you flog a man till the flesh hangs in strips from his back... When you drive nails through his body and pin him to a cross... When you let him hang there slowly suffocating in the sun for hours... when you then drive a spear into his heart just to make sure he's dead... When you wrap him like a mummy and lay him in a grave... When you seal his tomb with a wall of rock and post armed guards so there's no possibility that anyone gets in...

And then when, SUDDENLY, that man gets up, and walks out, looking like he's just woken up from a good night's sleep to the best and brightest morning of life... When he is so clearly ALIVE at a level that redefines what life looks like that his once-fickle followers are now all willing to be tortured to death rather than deny Him... There's something you can be sure of: **This man is whatever he says he is, and he can do whatever he says he can do.** He can forgive your sins, whatever you've done. He can transform your relationship, no matter how dead it seems. He can restore your strength and purpose in life. He can give you a new start where you're going. He can renew your family and this nation. Easter tells us: God can resurrect even the dead.

So if your life has been too haunted by the sound of **Taps**, hear this good news: **Reveille's coming.** This is how the apostle Paul put it after his life was changed forever by meeting the risen Christ: **"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death... so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no HOPE... For we believe that Jesus died and rose again... and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command... with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God... and the dead in Christ will RISE... Therefore encourage one another with these words"** (1 Thess 4:13-18).

Respond to the Call

I hope you WILL be encouraged by these words. God has such power and

desire to lift you up in every way you need it – in this life and the next. But I also want to encourage you to notice the crucial refrain in those words Paul wrote. You see, while God loves everybody, it's not just anybody who will rise to a Good Morning when the trumpet sounds Reveille. The biblical promise is that God will raise **"those who have fallen asleep IN him."** Paul underlines that again a couple of verses later: **"the dead IN Christ will rise."** These are not statements intended to create fear; they are just statements of fact. It's like when Jesus himself said **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me"** (John 14:6), he wasn't trying to exclude people; he was just trying to invite them IN. Let me try to explain.

This past January, I reached a point where I felt pretty much dead. Honestly, there were fleeting moments when death actually sounded like it might be relief to me. January was a really hard month, following a couple of other very hard months. Money was short at work and at home. My nerves were shot from stress and I was tossing and turning at night. My back was killing me from endless shoveling. And so one Monday morning I sat down in a chair, looked out the window at yet another frozen gray Chicago day with temperatures plummeting. It was like I could almost hear this nightmare version of TAPS -- Day is done, Gone the sun, From the lake, From the hills, From the sky. I just closed my eyes in surrender and nodded off.

It seemed like I'd been asleep for only a moment, when I woke up; and it was like the ultimate REVEILLE had played. The sun was shining out of a cloudless blue sky. The grass was this iridescent green. The temperature outside read 76 degrees. And people were walking by with tanned legs in shorts. You're thinking, I was in a delusional state, and you're close. You see, I neglected to mention that the chair where I fell asleep was IN an airplane bound for Palm Springs.

It's a simple fact: What you're IN, matters. If you want the stunning view you get from the top of the Willis Tower you have to get IN the elevator. If you want to experience the peace of floating above a golden world at sunrise, you have to get IN the hot air balloon. If you want to see what it's like when Christ lifts your life in all of the various ways he wants to and can, you have to get IN to Him. You don't have to. Nobody can make you. But if you want to go UP, then you need to place your life IN his hands. Put your trust for your future IN him and his Word. Put your seat back IN one of these chairs in coming weeks and see where the flight takes you.

One day the final trumpet call of God will sound and it will be too late. Some of us will have missed the gate call. We'll have missed the moment of opportunity to go where he would have gladly carried us. Don't miss it. Easter is God's quieter bugle playing the preliminary reveille. It's saying: Wake up, get IN to the life of Christ, and you too will RISE.

Please pray with me...

And now, Lord, we humbly place our lives in your hands today -- some of us for the very first time, some of us in a re-committed way, all of us longing to know in our own experience the all-surpassing power with which you raised Jesus from the grave. So lift us up in all the ways each of us needs that. Let this good morning be the beginning of a glorious new season of hope. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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Robert Russell, "Resurrection Promises," Preaching Today, Tape 151.