



# Running toward resurrection

Arienne Lehn, center, runs toward the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon.

## 'I was there'—one year since the Boston Marathon bombing

BY ARIANNE LEHN

Running last year's Boston Marathon was not at all what I'd long anticipated. There will always be a difference between the Boston Marathon and the 2013 Boston Marathon. Whenever I wear a Boston Marathon shirt, the question I'm asked won't be, "Wow, you ran Boston?" It'll be, "Did you run the year the finish line got bombed?"

I did.

Though I'm a minister and writer who continually mines words, the Boston Marathon was a day that left me none. Certain events strip our lives into silence. The ache comes from a place too deep, or the questions are really big, or the hurt is so real.

On that day, I boarded buses with dear friends and headed to Athlete's Village, where we ate power bars, waited in extensively long port-a-potty lines, and anticipated together the race of a lifetime.

There aren't words to describe the complete exhilaration I felt as

the gun went off and the race began. Crowds lined the street calling cheers and holding signs saying, "You're not sweating, you're sparkling," "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and, especially in Wellesley, "Kiss me." Tiny hands of children offered orange slices; volunteers extended cup after cup of Gatorade; and the divine breath gently pushed me through each step.

At one point in the race, I came alongside Team Hoyt. In addition to numerous triathlons, the father-son duo has completed the Boston Marathon 31 times. Dick pushes his son, Rick, in a wheelchair the entire way. I felt such inspiration as I turned and saw them to my side. Turning my head the other way, I saw a runner waddling along in a plush hot-dog costume.

Again, there just aren't words.

The 26.2 mile course, with its cresting hills and steep downturns, proved a very different terrain from

the Indiana pancake on which I had trained. At mile 19, during the third of four major hills, I experienced what every runner fears more than anything—I hit the wall. My legs became deadweight. Even vigorous arm pumping could not force my legs to follow suit. A focused, determined man strutted past me, swinging his arms, chanting to himself, "I FEEL GREAT! I FEEL GREAT! I FEEL GREAT!" and then, "I WANT MORE! I WANT MORE!" Once again, I found myself with no words.

Somehow, though, that divine breath continued to blow. Though I had to slow my pace, and even entertained the thought that childbirth might be easier, I eventually turned that final corner to see a finish line I will never forget.

I about collapsed when I crossed it. A volunteer wearing an angelic white jacket clasped my arm and helped steady me as I made my way farther down the chute to receive my medal.

With teeth chattering and legs stiff as a board, I pulled my cell phone out of my bag to text my husband and parents who were somewhere near the finish line.

“I’m still alive . . . barely.”

I hobbled my way over to the family meeting area. Of course the Ls had to be near the far end. There that blessed family was—my husband, parents, sister-in-law, and brother-in-law—arms open, smiles beaming. Five minutes later, after having just taken a picture together, we heard an extraordinarily loud boom. Then, seconds later, another sky-cracking boom. There was a hush, and then sirens. So many sirens. Ambulances, police cars, fire trucks, golf carts with race volunteers, and SWAT teams all rushed by. It was then I overheard a race official say the word “bomb.”

We didn’t know what to do.

Bewildered officials directed people to walk toward safety, but no one knew where safety was. We stepped into a building lined by multiple TVs. With other runners and families, we watched in shock. We now saw a visual image accompanying the explosions we’d heard. Limbs. Blood. Trauma. Fear. Chaos.

People stared, half-dazed, as they shuffled between the crowded streets and sidewalks.

My husband and I both struggled with our cell phones, trying to reach family and friends amid the spotty coverage. Lines were shut down in case cell phones were used to detonate the bombs.

It was then, amid the fear and panic, that God’s grace suddenly appeared. People offered blankets and food to strangers. I saw a sign in a McDonald’s window that read “Pay if you can.” Hotel lobbies embraced bedraggled runners and spectators; they could charge cell phones and stay warm. Amid the horror stood the healing community.

When you’re a runner, you have instant family. Everybody on the course was 100 percent for everybody

else. All of us ran toward the finish line that day. The most heroic were those who courageously ran into fear, blood, and tangled limbs. Overriding their fear was the desire to be human in the thick of inhumanity. In the darkness and the chaos and the pain of that unforgettable afternoon, the community ran. The broken picked up the broken and carried one another to healing. Though two men sought to destroy community that day, the community arose even stronger.

This kind of action—the carrying of sisters and brothers to healing—is one of the most hope-filled, grace-gushing gifts of Scripture. Before

Boston, I’d been reflecting on the book of Acts in preparation for preaching. The text I had planned to use, Acts 9:36–43, could not have resonated more powerfully in the days following the marathon.

The healing of Tabitha, or Dorcas as she’s named in Greek, sings the story of a hope-filled community—a community who believed in resurrection. Dorcas, whose name means “gazelle” in Aramaic, was a runner as well. Though she ran without a bib number, her race to follow Christ and offer compassion to those along the course of life held many more hills, walls, and speechless moments than mine.

## PRESBYTERIAN DISASTER ASSISTANCE WAS THERE TOO

On April 15, 2013, two pressure-cooker bombs exploded at 2:49 p.m. EDT in Copley Square, near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring an estimated 264 others. At the request of the Presbytery of Boston, the Synod of the Northeast, and ecumenical partners, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) deployed four members of the National Response Team: Cheryl Baldwin, a licensed mental health counselor from Pennsylvania; Lisa Baker, an attorney and second-career seminary student from Massachusetts; Mark Kayser, a retired military chaplain from North Carolina; and, as team lead, Bruce Wismer, a pastor and certified compassion-fatigue professional from Florida. The team’s purpose was to provide a ministry of presence, support the response efforts of various agencies and organizations, and assess the need and possibility for further response as folks began the long process of recovery.

The team arrived to find a city stunned and shocked—and filled with an overwhelming police and military presence. For four days the team connected, supported, and tended to the needs and concerns of faith leaders and had conversations with representatives from FEMA, the Red Cross, and other organizations, including the Department of Homeland Security’s Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The team attended prayer services and community gatherings, listening to accounts of the trauma experienced in disasters.

PDA represents the body of Christ and expresses the care that the larger faith community can offer during disasters. PDA embodies hope in chaos and works to bring hope out of chaos. Each disaster is unique, and every response requires various skills. PDA responds to both natural disasters and human-caused mass-casualty events throughout the country and is funded by the generous supporters of the One Great Hour of Sharing offering.

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When she found herself crossing the faint line where life and death embrace, the community arose on her behalf.

This story in Acts revealed to me the vulnerability and openness needed for healing—how healing is not achieved, but received, and that I was not going to find it on my own. I was going to have to open myself to the hands that would carry me forward.

I didn't know if I could do it.

Vulnerability is difficult for a pastor. As a 28-year-old in her first call, it surely was for me. My norm is holding the vulnerability of others. I am used to being one of the carriers, not the carried; the prayerful, not the prayed for.

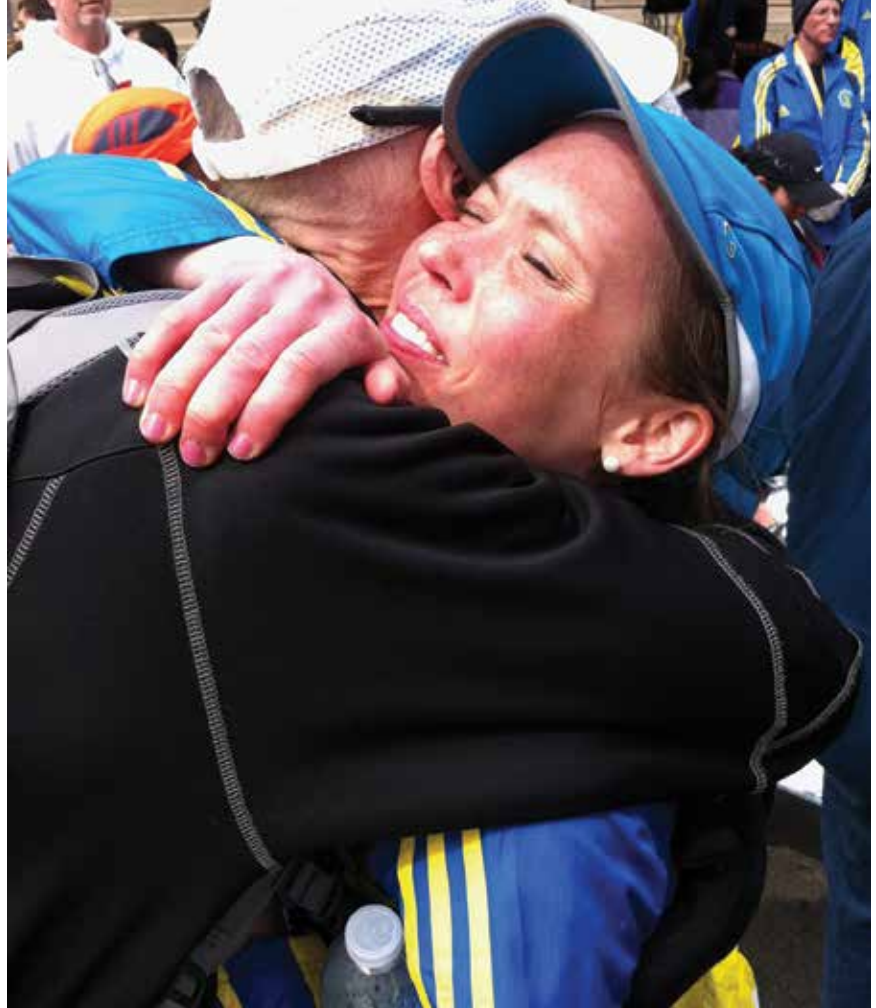
It was, though, in my woundedness that an incredible and humbling transformation happened. The congregation—the people who'd entrusted me with their vulnerability—reached out to hold mine. In an unprecedented way, they became my healing community.

Prior to the marathon, church members organized a "Be the Match" sponsorship drive to honor my father (a bone-marrow-transplant patient), my training, and my dream. On Marathon Monday, members gathered together for a marathon party to send me forth on a course runners have traversed for more than 100 years. When the bombs detonated, the congregation, like the disciples around Dorcas, rallied in prayer and resurrection hope. They called, texted, and emailed to connect us amid the splintering of stability.

As my husband and I arrived home at the airport in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a group from church had gathered to surprise us—arms open, tears flowing.

Sometimes, there just aren't words.

The following Sunday, I ascended the long, narrow staircase that towers above the sanctuary floor. My hands trembling, I placed the pages of my sermon on the pulpit.



After finishing the race, hobbling to the family meeting area, and searching for her parents and husband, Lehn hugs her father deeply.

I breathed, opened my mouth, paused, and wept. As I struggled to articulate the words I'd dug so deeply to uncover—words that came as tears—I was embraced by a grace and love in the pews before me.

After finishing my sermon, I turned to descend the staircase. My eyes were downcast as I crossed the marble chancel, and then I heard the sound of applause. I turned around to see my church family standing—something a beloved 94-year-old gentleman said had never happened in this parish. The community was standing not for me but for God's promises of healing, of hope, of resurrection—that these are what have the final say.

This community I'd only known for 18 months received my vulnerability and carried me forward. It was beyond humbling and more than freeing. It was God

and God's community that would bring the gift I could not give myself.

In death, or fear, or shock, we sometimes gird ourselves against the very source that brings us life. God calls the church to be the healing community—the people that wade into one another's lives with balm extended as we bring God's peace and resurrection promise to each and every corner. Dorcas's healing and rising reminded me that the world is not tethered to what it's been before but blown on the freeing winds of God's promise. All is made new.

And so I still run, thankful for God's faithfulness, for gracious healing, and for a community that carries me forward, whether or not I have my words.

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