

‘Terrorists Won’t Stop Me,’ Says Pastor Who Ran Boston Marathon

For Joe Briseno, senior pastor of Mason City Christian Church in Illinois, running the historic Boston Marathon was about more than running another race. “It was a ‘bucket list’ event,” he says.

“I have been running for over 20 years,” Briseno says. “This was my seventh marathon, and I was more than ready for the challenge.”

Mile after mile, Joe ran with more than 23,000 other runners, winding up and down the streets of historic Boston, up Heartbreak Hill, past half a million spectators, an eye ever on the clock.

“I was tracking to shatter my personal record,” he says. “Everything about the run thrilled me. And then at mile 18, it hit me—a cramp in my calf. I slowed a bit, still managing to clock good time. But then at mile 20, I just couldn’t ignore it anymore. I slowed to a walk, stopping the punishment on my injury.”

For the Oral Roberts University graduate, being forced to stop so close to fulfilling his dream should have been a moment of agony.

“But I was filled with peace,” he says. “I gave it all to the Lord, walking and knowing I would not break any record, but allowing myself to enjoy the cheers and excitement of the crowd [and] the lovely scenes of this beautiful city all around me. I walked knowing I would finish and was content that it would have to be enough.”

Then, suddenly, seven or eight policemen ran by him.

"That's odd," he says he thought. Then, looking a bit further ahead, half a mile from the finish line, he watched as one runner after another came to a halt.

"It was surreal. Here we are in the midst of the most famous race on earth, almost within sight of the finish line, and every single runner in front of me had stopped," he says. "Imagine 30 or 40 runners, so close to victory, stopping in their tracks. I knew then something was terribly wrong."

In that moment, the screams of dozens of sirens filled the air in all directions. Joe walked up to the crowd.

"What happened?" he asked a stranger. The sound of the crowds had drowned out the two explosions that claimed the lives of at least three people (including an 8-year-old boy), injured at least 170 and took limbs from at least 10.

As reality set in, Briseno called his wife, then was aware he had been corralled with 100 or so other runners.

"The police stopped us; we were not allowed to finish," Briseno says. "Most of us had loved ones also in the race, friends we trained with, traveled with. None of us had any idea how many were dead, injured, and if our loved ones were affected."

Sobs rose up beside him. A middle-aged woman was crying uncontrollably, the sound of her tears echoing down the street.

Turning to the woman, Briseno said, "Ma'am, I am a pastor. Can I help you?"

The woman grabbed his arm and fought to get the words out. "My sister, my twin sister, she was ahead of me. I don't know if she is OK," she said.

For an hour, Briseno ministered to people in the crowd. All thoughts of the finish line, the medal, the glory vanished. All that mattered were the hurting people all around him and that the Lord wanted him exactly where he was—not at the bomb blast site, not safely home with his family, but right there among the hurting and the frightened.

“When it was all finished and they released us, I went back to my hotel room, my lonely hotel room, and the grief hit me. I cried for the longest time,” Briseno says.

Tuesday morning, Briseno took the early flight out of Boston and arrived at his Mason City, Ill., home by noon.

“I’ll run another marathon,” he vows. “The terrorists will not stop me. God had another plan for me at this race. But there will be another.”