

“Don’t Always Play it Safe”

John 11:1-16

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Communion Devotion

On April 15, two explosions shattered the euphoria of the 2013 Boston Marathon. What started as a beautiful day to celebrate freedom and friendships ended in chaos and fear when two bombs exploded at the finish line of the Boston Marathon.

Because of continuous television coverage after the bombing, we watched many horrible events transpire as three people were killed, and two hundred sixty-four were injured. This was not all we saw, however. We also watched ordinary people become heroes that day by rushing to the aid of strangers who needed help.

Once again, many people in the area of the two bombings did not run away from danger but toward it. Without knowing if other bombs were yet to go off, they made their way to the injured and did what they could to save their lives.

I say “once again” because we have seen this happen every time a mass shooting has occurred in our schools, theaters, shopping centers and malls. Ordinary people, along with First Responders, have become heroes by putting their own lives in danger to help someone who was losing theirs. In all of these instances, the American people proved to be compassionate and courageous.

So was Jesus. His heart, too, was filled with compassion and courage.

This is what drew me to our text today. When word came to Jesus that his good friend, Lazarus, was sick, he told the disciples he needed to go to Bethany to help this family who had been so good to him.

This decision was not well received by the disciples. Bethany was on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and the disciples reminded Jesus the last time he went to Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities tried to stone him to death. Going back would certainly put his life in grave danger, not to speak of theirs.

Nothing the disciples said changed Jesus' mind. He informed them he was going to help his friends, even if he had to go alone.

It was at this point Thomas spoke up and said, "Let us go and die with him." For some reason, Peter was silent, so Thomas rallied the disciples to accompany Jesus on this dangerous journey.

Perhaps Peter was in agreement with the other disciples who did not want to return to Jerusalem. They would have preferred to play it safe by staying away from Jerusalem until after the Passover. Actually, it is hard to fault them for this.

Most of us are quite cautious people. We play it safe far more than we take risks, which is not always bad. We need to count the cost which accompanies every decision we face and weigh the consequences. I am confident there have been times when all of us threw caution to the wind, plunged ahead and lived to regret it.

As a follower of Christ, we cannot always play it safe. Jesus didn't, and neither should we.

Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem knowing it was highly risky and dangerous? Evidently, there were some things more important to him than his own comfort and safety, and helping a friend in need was one of them.

I think there were other things more important to Jesus than his own safety: fighting evil and injustice, standing up for the oppressed by speaking truth to power, correcting those who spoke for God when they said things which did not reflect God's heart but their greed and lust for power, confronting religious bullies who were more concerned with intimidating people than loving them, and exposing hypocrisy instead of ignoring it. These were but a few of the things Jesus valued over his own welfare, and God could not have been prouder of him.

Jesus knew that helping Lazarus would come with a high price, but he also knew staying away, hiding from the religious authorities or remaining silent would come with an even higher price. Those are the ones he was unwilling to live with.

The kind of change Jesus made and wants us to make in our world rarely comes by playing it safe. As a matter of fact, I would be hard pressed to think of a time constructive change has occurred without a struggle. For good to triumph over evil, people must be as compassionate and courageous as Jesus and willing to take great risks.

When is the last time you did this?

When did you refuse to play it safe by helping someone others ignored?

When did you speak truth to power by standing up for those whose voices had been silenced or whose stories had never been heard?

When did you confront injustice and do your part to turn evil into good?

Where are you being called to go this week to help someone in need?

Where does your voice need to be heard and your influence felt?

One of the most important documents written in the 20th Century was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. It is a response to a letter written by eight white Alabama clergymen who condemned King and his Civil Rights campaign. This letter was published in the local newspaper.

You recall in 1963, Blacks in the south could not eat in restaurants, stay in motels, drink from public water fountains, or go to the same schools or parks as white children. It had been one hundred years since Lincoln freed the slaves, but in the minds of these eight clergymen, King was acting too hastily to end segregation.

A copy of the newspaper containing the ministers' letter, *A Call for Unity*, was brought to King in jail. Immediately, he began writing a response on the margins of the paper and scraps of paper brought to him by a jail employee.

Perhaps the most famous line in King's response was, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." King expressed disappointment with the clergy who criticized him for creating a disturbance in Birmingham but said nothing about the discriminating laws and policies which oppressed a large part of their population. To King's dismay, the clergy never mentioned the abuse inflicted upon the protestors when they were arrested, especially the women, children and elderly, or the inhumane treatment they were enduring in jail.

King appealed to the leaders of the churches in Birmingham to help him tell the story and plight of the Black men and women, boys and girls, and to call for an end to segregation. A few did, but most remained silent or critical. There were far too few Thomas' in the churches at that time who were willing to say, "Let us go and die with him."

I understand. Standing against the strong winds of injustice is hard, **but there is nothing on this table today which calls us to play it safe when it comes to living out our faith.** Everything here encourages us to be as bold as Jesus was in the pursuit of justice. It compels us to be as compassionate and courageous as the First Responders and ordinary citizens who put their lives in danger at the Boston Marathon to save the lives of others.

Thomas answered that call long ago on a dusty Palestinian road. Will you?