Note: This sermon may be adapted to meet your congregation's needs, your preaching style, and preferred time length

RISEN!: Week 5 - March 27, 2016

"The Jesus Who Wants You Fully Alive"

TEXTS

"I have come that they may have life." —John 10:10

"So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." —Revelation 3:16 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." —Mark 12:30–31, NKJV

INTRODUCTION

Saint Irenaeus, an early Church Father, wrote: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

If you've ever been to an opening day for a sports team, you've seen people cheering, jumping up and down, high-fiving, and perfect strangers may even hug each other. American sports fans go absolutely crazy at games. We cry when we lose, cheer when we win, and nobody thinks this is anything but normal. People say, "There's a fan!"

But if I went to most churches and did any of that, they'd say, "There's a fanatic!"

Passion is a big deal in America. Hollywood movies, every soap opera, and thousands of books promote it. Amazon.com features hundreds upon hundreds of books with the word *passion* in the title. Passion is all over the Internet. If you Google *passion*, you can easily find articles, magazines, and books with titles like these: A Passion for Alligators, A Passion for Artichokes, A Passion for Birds, A Passion for Castles, A Passion for Chocolate, A Passion for Fashion, A Passion for Fly Fishing, A Passion for Flying, A Passion for Gardening, A Passion for Golf (now were talking!), A Passion for Hang Gliding, A Passion for Hunting, and A Passion for Jazz.

You can even buy books on A Passion for Mushrooms, A Passion for Needlepoint, A Passion for Pizza, A Passion for Ponies, A Passion for Potatoes, A Passion for Reading, and A Passion for Shoes.

If you're feeling especially passionate, you can also purchase what must be a number one best seller among sauna enthusiasts, *A Passion for Steam*.

It's almost as if we think it's appropriate to get excited, be enthusiastic, have a passion for anything in life . . . as long as it's not God. And we often are passionate about everything . . . except God.

Jesus was crystal clear about living with passion. A man walked up to Jesus one day and said, in essence, "I'm busy. I don't have time to read the book, and I missed the movie when it came out. Can you give me the CliffsNotes version of the Bible? Is there a point to the whole thing?"

Jesus said absolutely. Here is a summary of the entire Bible:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:30–31)

Feel the passion in Jesus's words. The repeating word is "all." Jesus's summary was crystal clear. He was saying, "We are to love God, serve God, love and serve people with *passion!*" I am to give it *all* I have. No halfhearted commitment.

This is the greatest spiritual problem in the Bible. Question: What is the greatest sin in the Bible?

Some Christians think the greatest sin is being Democrat. Others think it's being Republican. Some

Christians think the greatest sinners are Raider fans. Some think getting stoned is the worst sin, while others think it's getting drunk. You might say, "It's the Scarlet Letter—Adultery." For others, it's gossip. Still others say it's going to church in shorts. The list is endless.

The greatest sin is listed in the third chapter of Revelation, when Jesus said He'd rather have you be cold or hot than lukewarm: "So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16).

C. S. Lewis wrote, "The only thing Christianity cannot be is moderately important. It is either ridiculous or it's the most important thing in the world."

The greatest sin is being disinterested in God and apathetic about His Word.

Perhaps in America we've landed closer to what Salvation Army founder William Booth warned about:

The chief dangers which confront the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, and heaven without hell.

When you look at people who have made the most impact in the world, they were almost never the smartest, wealthiest, best educated, or most beautiful. But they did have one thing in common: they were people of passion.

Passionate people are world changers. Think of Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Graham, Florence Nightingale, Luis Palau, the apostle Paul, King David—these are all passionate people. They said, "There are things that matter. I want to make my life count, and I'm not going to waste my life on trivial things."

Nothing great is done without passion. Passion is what:

- Drives scientists to find new cures to dreaded diseases
- Motivates people to live for great causes
- Equips athletes to break records and get to the Olympics
- Sustains you in reaching your goals as you go through life

Passion energizes life. It's what makes you alive. Without passion, your life becomes dull, drab, boring, and routine. The problem is that passion is easy to lose.

I want to give you a universal equation: NEW = PASSION!

All new car owners are fired up. Nobody else can drive the car. It gets washed every thirty minutes.

And that lasts for a while . . .

All new parents are fired up. All conversations are focused on the new baby. Pictures are taken every second. Then the third and fourth kids come along, and they wonder why there are no pictures of them.

All new marriages are fired up. While they are dating, guys run around to open the car door. After they're married, they're looking at their wives saying, "What's wrong, is your arm broken?" Romance becomes routine. As a friend of mine says, "Marriage was like a midnight phone call—first I got the ring, then I woke up!"

Everything new is fired up. New restaurants are packed. New iPhones sell out. People wait in long lines to see new movies.

All new Christians start out this way, too. You get passionate when . . .

- You first learn the great truths of the Good News.
- You first learn that every sin you've ever committed has been totally and completely wiped away,
 obliterated for all eternity.
- You first learn that God made you for a purpose, that there is deep meaning and significance to your life.
- You first learn that your future is absolutely secure—forever! God has promised you a place called heaven that's perfect. He's prepared it for you. Because you've committed your life to Christ, one day you're going to spend eternity with Him in that perfect place.

You get passionate when you first learn those things, and you want to tell everybody.

Then we run out of gas. Enjoying God is replaced with enduring life.

Paul warned us about losing passion with this plea: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor" (Romans 12:11).

The key word here is *keep*! That means it's not automatic. And when there is no spark, no vision, no excitement, no faith, no enthusiasm, no willingness to risk, it affects your marriage, your emotions, and even your spirituality.

The good news is this: if you can lose it, you can recapture it.

Some of you need to get your fire back. Some of you need to get your hopes back up. Some of you need to catch a fresh vision from God for your future. Some of you are in danger of wasting the one life you get to live without ever catching fire and fully living. I am praying that this message will light a fire in your heart and your life that will never go out.

Jesus's prescription for restoring your passion is the exact opposite of the lifestyle path American culture (and some Christians) use to pave over our tired souls.

Here it is:

SIX WAYS JESUS TAUGHT US TO KEEP THE FIRE ALIVE

This could also be called "How to Avoid Becoming an Old, Cranky, Boring, Uptight Grown-Up."

1. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF YOUNG

Just look at the childlike passion of Bartholomew:

Video Clip Week 5

Cemeteries are full of people who are dead serious about life. Jesus said these shocking words to the old, respectable, rule-keeping, tradition-keeping religious elites of the day: "Unless you become like little children . . ." (Matthew 18:3).

It's true the Bible calls us to "grow up into" and to "mature," and it teaches there is more to life than having fun. But maybe we have lost something in the process that God never intended for us to lose.

Maybe what we've lost was signaled at the very first Christmas.

The surprising message of Christmas is "God has become a baby." That erases every misconception anyone has ever had about God. Each year at Christmas, we discover how young God is.

In his remarkable book *Orthodoxy*, published in 1908, G. K. Chesterton wrote,

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon.

Chesterton is hinting that maybe the sun doesn't just come up every day. God might be commanding it every single day. And the next morning, He says, "Yesterday was great. Let's see it again! Encore!" Maybe it's not automatic. Maybe God never gets tired of sunrises and sunsets.

Chesterton went on,

It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy.

Chesterton summed it up in the best one-liner: "For we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

That's what is communicated at Christmas. That's what is signaled in the words of Isaiah: "For to us a child is born" (Isaiah 9:6). We always assume God is older than we are, grouchier than we are, more uptight than we are, but when we really read the Bible, we discover that we are the ones who have "sinned and grown old."

We discover that God is younger than we are! He is more playful than we are. He is more alive and creative than we are. He is more full of life and zest than we are.

We discover that we are the old, grouchy ones and God is the young, delightful One. That is the exact opposite of what most people believe about God and most Christians believe about spirituality.

The birth of a baby shook up the religious world. Maybe it ought to happen again. Rather than somebody becoming a Christian, and then becoming more religious and uptight and judgmental and opinionated and harsh.

Maybe it's time to reconnect with the Jesus who said, "Unless you become like little children."

2. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF DEAD

Clavius, a Roman tribune, had the goal to live a life for himself:

Jesus made outrageous statements like:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:25)

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? (Mark 8:36)

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

Jesus is saying, "You're better off dead!" This is a strange recruitment campaign. Today's marketing gurus would laugh at promising death to get people to join. But today's terrorists don't—they've hijacked a page out of our playbook. The problem is, it's *our* playbook. We just don't follow it.

Today, a cross is a piece of jewelry. We forget that it was an instrument of torture and death.

At the time of Christ, there were days when more than five hundred Israelites were crucified each day. They were publicly displayed where people would have to walk. Scholars suggest that when Jesus said, "Take up your cross," He could have been standing near one of those crosses, maybe looking at it. Everybody knew He meant, "Be ready to die."

A life of following Jesus is built on a foundation of dying to self.

The issue comes down to this: If I will not die to myself, I can't follow Jesus. It's not that He won't let me follow Him. There is a "can't" of permission, which is, "You can't do this because I won't let you."

Then there is a "can't" of impossibility, which is, "You can't do this because it is impossible." For example, training to compete in the Olympics on an "All Twinkies Diet" will make your chances of being on the team "impossible." The "can't of impossibility" in following Jesus is this: Whatever I am refusing to die to will make authentically following Jesus "impossible"!

We'll never make it if we try to follow two different masters. We're better off being obedient.

[Use this illustration, or replace it with one of your own]

Sean was one of the wildest guys ever to come through our ministry. A former football player, Sean somehow made it through high school, then partied his way through four years at Sacramento State.

During his high school years his dad came to Christ (Sean may have caused that!). Sean's dad tried to tell him about Jesus, but Sean would have none of it. His dad finally gave up and started praying for (or at) him.

During Sean's senior year in college, he ran into a guy he had known in high school. They got talking and the guy said, "You're not going to believe this, but after high school, I became a Christian." For the first time Sean was ready. He listened, and the guy led Sean to Christ right there in the middle of the campus.

Sean's first move was to call his dad. "Dad, are you sitting down?" His dad said, "What now?" Sean replied, "I want you to know, I've just become a Christian."

Sean's dad, in one of the most memorable moments of a parent's faith walk for his child, said, "Son, call me when you're sober," then hung up. Great response.

Sean's next move was to go to church (good move), where he heard his first sermon. The topic:

Joseph fleeing temptation and running away from Potiphar's wife. Two weeks later, at the end of a date, the girl he was with invited him up to her apartment. He went up. She put on music and they started dancing. In Sean's words, he said, "I was just getting ready to make my move . . . and then I remembered . . . Joseph. I

let go of her, took a step back, and shocked her by saying, 'I'm really sorry, but I gotta go." He walked over to the door, put his hand on the doorknob, and she said, "You mean to tell me that if I take off all my clothes right now, you will still walk out that door?" Sean said, "I have gotta go now!"

He ran down the stairs, jumped into his truck, and on the way out of her parking lot, started shouting for joy because he had resisted his first temptation. Whatever happened to Sean? He now has a vibrant marriage, three great kids, and is pastoring a church in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Self-denial is not self-rejection. It is psychologically impossible to surrender to somebody if you do not believe they have your best interest at heart. Self-denial is the process of being weaned off selfish attitudes and sinful appetites that, as it turns out, don't result in better living but just lead to addictive behavior, empty lives, and broken dreams.

The amazing paradox is this: Dying to self looks like it leads to a life of emptiness and loss. In reality, dying to self leads to a life of joy and freedom. Why? Dead people aren't stressed. Dead people don't steal. Dead people aren't enslaved by addictive behavior. Dead people aren't weighed down by worry. Dead people don't abandon wives and kids for a younger spouse. Dead people don't judge, criticize, or condemn. Dead people are never jealous. Dead people are able to say no to temptation and walk out of an apartment on their way to a brand-new life. Somehow dying to sin makes me more (not less) alive!

Paul wrote, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

Eugene Peterson wrote, "Life confined to the self is a prison, a joy-killing, neurosis-producing, disease-fomenting prison." The ultimate goal of dying to self is not to walk around with the stagnant emptiness that comes when you first begin to deny yourself something you're attached to. The ultimate goal is to arrive at the day when you are dead to sin and alive to God.

¹ Eugene Peterson, Where Your Treasure Is (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 12.

Die to yourself. You will never be more alive. We're far better off dead.

3. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF DEPENDENT

The disciples didn't have the answers, but they were dependent on following Jesus to figure it out.

When I stop depending on God, I start depending on me. That leads to stress, worry, anxiety, regret, and frustration. Passion is replaced by pressure and panic.

Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

[Use this illustration, or replace it with one of your own]

When I was a seminary professor, Jerry and Nancy Reed moved to the community, and he became the professor of evangelism. When he got there, his presence and grace permeated the seminary in ways I had never seen. Everyone wanted to be with him, and everyone wanted to be him. His kids all walked with God, and all of them went into ministry. His own son met with him once a week just to be mentored—by his own dad. Amazing! He became a living legend among the community there. I even took one of his courses, just to learn from him. At that time, he was in his mid-sixties, yet he was the most alive person on the campus.

I finally asked him, "What is your secret?"

"You're not going to want to hear it," he said.

"No, come on," I said. "You're the most alive person here. Everyone, including your own kids, want your faith. What's your secret?"

"You're not going to want to hear it," he said again. Then he told me. "Twenty-five years ago, my wife and I figured out exactly what we could live on and how much we could give away. And then, on purpose, we gave more money away than we could afford to give away, which forced us to depend on God. Every year since then, we get out on a limb, figuring out where that limb would support us before it would break, and then going a couple of inches more just to depend on God. Every year we have experienced in

brand-new ways that we could trust God. I have more stories of God's grace. I have no idea how anyone has an alive faith until you get in a place where you have to trust God, so He can prove Himself."

You are better off dependent. As Jerry told me repeatedly, "God is alive! He proves it every day."

4. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF CONNECTED

Let me ask you a passion-defining question. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were closer to God than you are right now? If the answer is yes, what happened? These are the things to ask yourself:

- Why don't I feel the passion that I used to?
- Why don't I feel the same excitement about my career that I used to?
- Why don't I still feel the same enthusiasm about my marriage that I used to?
- Why aren't I as close to and on fire for God as I used to be?
- Why does my relationship with Jesus feel so stale . . . or distant . . . or cold?
- What keeps me from being spiritually on fire for God?
- Why does so much of my life lack any sense of urgency?

We lack all of this usually because we've lost connection.

Untended fires soon become nothing more than piles of ashes.

I've never had the courage to tell this story until now. A few years ago, because of some amazing connections, I received an invitation to meet the president of the United States in the Oval Office. I was thrilled, but the protocol was unbelievable. They sent letters. The FBI contacted me. It was really something. It finally came down to one final question I had, which was, "What am I supposed to wear?"

The answer was, "Just wear what you normally wear to church."

My wife said, "That's not going to happen!"

So I had to go out and get a suit and tie and make airline reservations. I flew across the country and checked into the closest hotel to the White House on the night before. My friend said to meet him at the front gates at 6:30 a.m. with my identification, and be prepared to take a while to get checked in.

I was so excited, I couldn't sleep. I closed the heavy drapes on the window, set the alarm on my iPhone for 6:00 a.m., and then started texting everyone—*Tomorrow morning I'm meeting the president in the Oval Office!*

The next morning, my room was pitch dark when I woke up. My hotel room phone was ringing. My friend said, "Hey! Where are you?"

"Man, I'm still waking up," I said.

"Why aren't you here?"

"What's the problem?" I said. "My alarm hasn't even gone off yet."

"You were supposed to be here at 6:30," he said. "It's 6:30 now."

I looked at my phone and it was dead! The clock in the hotel room said 6:30. He was right.

"I can be there in ten minutes," I said. "I'll run across the street."

He said, "I am really sorry. You've missed your chance."

It slowly dawned on me, I've just slept through my one chance to meet the president of the United States in the Oval Office. I sat in bed stunned.

Now let me tell you two things about that story:

One, it's not true. It never happened. I never have received an invitation to meet with the president.

Two, this same scenario happens to Christians all the time. Every day, every morning, we have the opportunity to meet with Somebody far more important than the president of the United States, and a lot of times we sleep through it. The God of the Universe has invited us to get up, to read His Word, to pray, to connect with Him. We actually get to connect with the President of the Universe, but many of us sleep through it every morning. No wonder we're so distant, disconnected, dissatisfied, and joyless.

God, the actual God of the Universe, longs to be close to you. You are as close to God as you want to be.

5. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF FOCUSED

The only people I know who have sustainable, positive, long-term joy and passion are all people with one thing in common—they believe God has amazing plans for tomorrow. Why? Future focus creates passion.

That leads to a very critical question: Do I have any future dreams?

I love being around people who have expectation for their future! They believe God is alive, the resurrection really happened, God is still going to work, and God is going to work *tomorrow*.

As a psychologist told me, "What a person believes about their future is more important than anything that has happened in their past or anything that is happening in their present."

[Use this illustration, or replace it with one of your own]

When our church was about ten years old, we were building our first building. Two months before we moved in, one of the strategic leaders of the church asked me for a tour to see exactly what was happening. We walked through the big construction mess.

As we were walking back to my office, he said, "I've got a question for you."

We stopped walking, and he said, "Now that you've got it built, are you going to leave?"

I was shocked. I didn't think about my answer. It just spilled out. "Are you kidding me? The first ten years have felt like spring training. In three or four weeks, it feels like we're throwing out the first ball. Then we finally get to do the kind of stuff that we think God has called us to do once this thing is open. We're going to use it as a tool. We have stuff for kids, young people, a conference . . ."

I went on with about fifteen more things that I felt like God was calling us to do. He said, "Good," then got in his car and left. I went back to my office and sat there for a long time. Did I like everything about

the church? Did I like raising money? Did I like the political battles of building anything in the state of California? Did I like the weekend we were picketed? Did I like the day that I got sued and the church got sued for building a building? Did I like everyone critiquing the plans? Did I like how much longer it took than we'd planned?

All of those answers were *no*, but I couldn't imagine leaving because I believed God had amazing future plans for us. I knew I was tired because building the church was so draining, but when I asked myself if I was more passionate about the ministry than ever, the answer was yes for one simple reason—I believed that God had future plans for us and He gave us the place to do them.

Whit Hobbs wrote,

Passion is waking up in the morning, wherever you are, however old or young, and bounding out of bed because you know there's something out there that you love to do, that you believe in, that you're good at, something that's bigger than you are and you can hardly wait to get at it again. It's something you'd rather be doing more than anything else in the whole world. You wouldn't give it up for money; it means more to you than money. And hopefully it's something that makes the world a better place.

6. JESUS KNOWS YOU'RE BETTER OFF MISSIONAL

Never have people had more comforts than in the life we now live in America. Americans should be the happiest people in history. Yet the suicide rate is skyrocketing. Suicide among teens is now the second leading cause of death. Sales of antidepressant drugs have gone through the roof. Why? Because people have everything except . . . purpose. People with no purpose will have no passion because passion and purpose go together. Passion actually creates purpose.

Whether they realize it or not, everyone gives their life away for something. Some people give their lives away for a career, and forty years later they get a gold watch—big deal!

Some people give their lives away to get a big bank account.

- Some people give their whole lives to get some kind of pleasure out of life.
- Some people give their whole lives to attain some status.
- Some people just want their picture in some magazine.

The real question is this: Am I living for a compelling purpose?

The problem is that many people are giving first-class allegiance to second-class causes.

How much is it going to matter in eternity? How much is it going to matter forever? When you die, is it going to matter at all? You're going to give your life for something. The question is, are you going to give your life for something that actually matters?

Contrast the lives of two of the most successful people of the twentieth century.

Elvis Presley was the first global rock star. He sold millions of albums, made thirty-three movies, claimed a billion fans around the world, and twenty-five years after his death his *Elvis Presley: The 50 Greatest Hits* was the number one album in America. In spite of his enormous success, his friends say that Elvis was an unfulfilled and unhappy man when he died at age forty-two.

His wife, Priscilla, said in an interview years after his death, "Elvis never came to terms with who he was meant to be or what his purpose in life was. He thought he was here for a reason, maybe to preach, maybe to save, maybe to serve, maybe to care for people. That agonizing desire was always with him, and he knew he wasn't fulfilling it. So he'd go on stage and he wouldn't have to think about it. Elvis hadn't a clue where to begin to look. In a sense, he was lost."

Nelson Mandela had horrific life circumstances, but he had a driving purpose. He said,

- Leaders must be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their people.
- I hate race discrimination most intensely and in all its manifestations. I have fought it all during my life; I fight it now and will do so until the end of my days.
- Difficulties break some men but make others.

- I was made by the law a criminal, not because of what I had done, but because of what I stood for.
- We are fighting for a society where people will cease thinking in terms of colour.

What kept him going? What gave him strength? What filled him with the kind of passion that frees an entire country? Purpose. In short, Nelson Mandela was living for a purpose more important than making himself as comfortable as he could be.

The great thing about people who live with purpose, who are connected, and who have future dreams is that their passion overcomes any obstacle. Max Lucado told a story that illustrates this brilliantly.

"I have everything I need for joy!" Robert Reed said.

His hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself. He can't feed himself. He can't brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. His shirts are held together by strips of Velcro. His speech drags like a worn-out audio cassette.

Robert has cerebral palsy.

The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn't keep him from graduating from high school or attending Abilene Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn't keep him from teaching at a St. Louis junior college or from venturing overseas on five mission trips.

And Robert's disease didn't prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal. He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language.

Then he stationed himself daily in a park, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa.

I heard Robert speaking recently. I watched other men carry him in his wheelchair onto the platform. I watched them lay a Bible in his lap. I watched his stiff fingers force open the pages. And I watched people in the audience wipe away tears of admiration from their faces. Robert could have asked for sympathy or pity, but he did just the opposite. He held his bent hand up in the air and boasted, "I have everything I need for joy."

His shirts are held together by Velcro, but his life is held together by joy.2

Everybody is trying to figure out how to live longer. That's not the real issue. It's not how long you live that matters, it's what you live for that matters.

It's not the years in your life. It's the life in your years.

This sermon is prepared from a new book, *Jesus Called: He Wants His Church Back*, by Ray Johnston, released by Thomas Nelson.

² Max Lucado, "Peace That Defies Pain," March 21, https://maxlucado.com/read/topical/peace-that-defies-pain/.