

Don't Let Nobody

John 20:10-13

Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

Exodus 20:15

"Thou shall not steal."

Are you ready to hear sad?

This is sad and it's hard to hear.

I know a gay man who because of his homosexuality was so harassed as a teenager, who was so picked on, who was so bullied at his high school that he dropped out of school. Dropped out! He didn't finish, didn't get his diploma, didn't walk across the stage with a cap and gown on and shake the principal's hand and hear his parents and relatives clap, didn't celebrate graduation at the beach because-----because he had had enough and he couldn't take it anymore.

I'm not making this up. I wish I was making it up, but I'm not. They stole his high school education from him.

Were you ever bullied in school? Did anybody ever try to get you to cough up your lunch money?

I'm sure you know the problem with bullies.-----If you give the bully your lunch money on Monday, he's also going to want your lunch money on -----yeah, on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday and----well, he's going to want your lunch money for a long time. Give them an inch; they'll take a mile. Give them your lunch money; the next thing they will want is your weekly allowance.

Bullies are people who pick on you, push you, hit you, call you names, and---bullies are----this is what I'm stressing in today's sermon, bullies are individuals who take things from you, who steal from you, who break the _____ Does anybody remember which commandment it is? It's the 8th commandment. Bullies are people who break the 8th commandment by stealing your lunch money.

If only it were just our lunch money.

Which leads me to religious bullies. Yes, religious bullies with loud voices and big Bibles underneath their arms and enough certainty to trample whomever and whatever all in the name of God and supposedly for His sake. God has appointed me to stamp out sin and ignorance even if that means roughing you up.

Reminds me of the letter writer who sent me to hell after my infamous *Homosexuality Is Not A Sin* article. After shredding me up and calling me horrible and satanic and, I think he said stupid--he closed the correspondence with, and I kid you not---he closed the correspondence with "Your Friend in Christ."-----Hey, I'm just roughing you up because I love you. I'm your friend. Of course, you are my friend. Maybe we could be best friends, send each other daily emails, go on vacation together.

Religious bullies. Don't be fooled. They sound sweet. They may have nice big Christian smiles. They can quote the Bible, which isn't the same thing as knowing the Bible. They can tell you right and wrong, good and evil, who's in and who's out. Some of them even know when Jesus is coming back. A religious bully is like a schoolyard bully in that he or she tries to steal something from you, only it's not your money they steal. What a religious bully tries to steal is Jesus, the Jesus who keeps you singing, the Jesus who loves you for the Bible tells you so, the Jesus who is all the world to you, the Jesus who tenderly calls you. That's what a religious bully tries to steal; they try to steal Jesus from right under your nose---from right under your mind---from right under your broken heart. And you end up like Mary outside the tomb crying, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."

Listen to me. Don't you let nobody steal Jesus from you.

In December of 2004 someone stole Jesus from a Wilmington, North Carolina family. Stole Jesus right out of their front yard, from their nativity scene. "I know he's just plastic, but to us, he was priceless," said Cindy Poteat.

In December of 2005 Jesus was stolen in Fredericksburg, Virginia. That's right, Baby Jesus disappeared from right under Mary and Joseph's watchful eyes. A hard-plastic baby Jesus was removed from outside the dental office of Dr. Wayne Whitley. Mrs. Whitley reported, "The baby Jesus disappeared sometime between Dec. 3-5." The Whitleys put up a banner behind the Nativity scene that read "Christ has been Stolen from Christmas."

2007 was also a bad year for people stealing Jesus. In Arredondo Farms, Florida somebody stole not only holiday decorations, but they also stole, you guessed it, a baby Jesus from a nativity scene. And in Concord, New Hampshire, workers at St. Peter's Church discovered the theft of a baby Jesus figurine from the church nativity scene on Christmas morning. Yeah, Christmas morning. Police said vandals pried a Plexiglas shield from the front of the outdoor nativity scene and removed the foot-long figurine of the Christ child.

Evidently, stealing Jesus this past December was epidemic because in Nyack (Neye-ack), New York a statue of the Baby Jesus was also stolen. And get this, it was the third time in four years the Jesus statue was taken from the manger scene at Verterans' Park. Somebody also stole Jesus in 2004 and 2005. What's with all these people stealing Jesus?

Of course, it's not the plastic Jesus in nativity scenes I'm worried about getting stolen from you. I worried about the religious bullies out there who will steal Jesus from you by tell informing you that if you don't give this amount of money, if you don't cough up this amount of dinero---your life, your financial situation, the amount God will bless you---all will dramatically

decrease. But if you increase your giving to my ministry----ummmmm----I mean, if you will increase your giving to God, then the amount of blessings you receive will be in direct proportion to what you give.

They tell you this all the while using the money you give to support---How shall I say it?----a very non-Jesus-like lifestyle. Did you see the news piece on the lavish, fly around in private jets, Jesus can stay with me in my 50 room house---Just want to make sure there's room in the inn for Jesus.-----set up of Kenneth Copeland?

Religious bullies stealing Jesus. If you don't believe these doctrines, if you don't sign on the dotted line, if you don't swallow the orthodoxy, if you don't believe in the virgin birth, a literal reading of Genesis, the atonement, the inerrant, infallible Bible, then you have no right to call yourself a Christian. You aren't a child of Jesus. You are a child of Satan, Lucifer, the Devil.

Stealing Jesus. If you aren't heterosexual----if you are one of those ho---mo---sex---uals---and we aren't even going to get into transgendered---if you aren't a Adam and Eve, if you are Adam and Steve---if you aren't a Adam and Eve Christian then you aren't a Christian. What's your next question?

Oh, you have a question about political parties. That's easy. If you aren't in this political party, you aren't a true believer.

A few years ago we got some literature from one of Vicky's relatives which informed us we weren't in the political party God wanted us to be in---being my wife is a Yellow Dog and I'm a radical independent. They tried to steal Jesus from us.

Stealing Jesus. Sometimes the Christians do it with their own immorality. A know a man who hasn't gone to church since the day he walked into his bedroom and saw a deacon----well, let's just say the deacon was doing his sort of deacon ministry with his wife in his bed in his bedroom in his house.

Don't let any Christian steal Jesus from you because of their sins and imperfections and hypocrisies.

Stealing Jesus. When they tell you high how to jump----you say my feet are firmly planted on the ground in cement.

When they tell you to repeat after them----you say, What did you say? The batteries in my hearing aids are shot.

When religious bullies tell you what to do---you say, I'll put it on my to do list. And by the way, there are 1 million two hundred thousand and forty-three items before I get to what you want on the list.

When they command you not to cross over a line---you say, How about a line dance?

When they demand that you straighten up, You tell them you are straight but not narrow. Or if you are not straight, tell them whatever you want to and have fun doing it.

And if they tell you to walk to the sound of their drummer inform them, you tell them you'll drum up you own drums.

Don't let nobody----don't let nobody take Jesus away from you.

Well, let me close with two stories and a quote.

Here's the first story.

Bruce Bawer in his book, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* tells how in the Spring of 1996, he was in New York City. He writes: I'm standing on a moderately crowded subway car reading a paperback when I look up to see a man about my age--thirty-nine--who is standing a few feet away and staring at me with disconcerting intensity. For an instant we gaze speechlessly into each other's eyes. I expect him to say (as sometimes happens) that he's read one of my books and recognizes me from my dust jacket photo. Instead he asks me a question. "Are you a Christian?" The question takes me aback, though I know why he has asked it. I am reading *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, whose author, the Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, is notorious for his denial of many orthodox Christian doctrines and for his work on behalf of an inclusive church.

"Yes," I reply. "I am a Christian."

"Are you born again?" His eyes meet mine in an unsettlingly intimate gaze. I pause for a moment. We have entered difficult territory. Am I born again?

Have you noticed that a lot of people who are born again need to be born again because they are racist, sexist, homophobic and don't care about the poor? Have you noticed that?

Don't let nobody, including a so-called born again Christian steal Jesus from you.

A promised you a quote. It's by Susan Carter, something she wrote about her mother which I read during the funeral service. Susan wrote: I'm thankful she taught me to search the Bible for myself and not rely on anyone else to tell me the word of God." Which is another way of saying. You aren't, you will not, this day or the next day ever steal Jesus from me.

You better watch those Wedgewood women. They're feisty.

And here's the final story. I've told you not to let religious bullies seal Jesus from you. What I haven't told you is if someone tries to steal Jesus from you---you still have to be Jesus to the Jesus stealer. Darn it.

Roger Dean Kiser tells this story.

I walked into the Huddle House Restaurant in Brunswick, Georgia and sat down at the counter as all of the booths were taken. I picked up a menu and began to look at the various items trying to decide if I wanted to order breakfast or just go ahead and eat lunch.

"Excuse me" said someone, as they touched me on the shoulder.

I looked up and turned to the side to see a rather nice looking woman standing before me.

"Is your name Roger by any chance?" she asked me.

"Yes." I responded, looking rather confused as I had never seen the woman before.

"My name is Barbara and my husband is Tony." she said, pointing to a distant table near the door leading into the bathrooms.

I looked in the direction that she was pointing but I did not recognize the man who was sitting, alone at the table.

"I'm sorry. I'm, ah. I'm ah, confused. I don't think that I know you guys. But my name is Roger. Roger Kiser" I told her."

"Tony Claxton. Tony from Landon High School in Jacksonville, Florida?" she asked me.

"I'm really sorry. The name doesn't ring a bell." I said.

She turned and walked back to her table and sat down. She and her husband immediately began talking and once in a while I would see her turn around in her seat and look directly at me.

I finally decided to order breakfast and a cup of decaffeinated coffee. I sat there continually racking my brain trying to remember who this Tony guy was.

"I must know him" I thought to myself. "He recognizes me for some reason." I picked up my coffee up and took a sip. All of a sudden it came to me like a flash of lightning.

"Tony. TONY THE BULL. The bully of my seventh grade geography class".

How many times that sorry jerk had made fun of my big ears in front of the girls in my class?
How many times this sorry sucker had laughed at me because I had no parents and had to live in a orphanage? How many times this big bully slammed me up against the lockers in the hallway just to make himself look like a big man to all the other students?

He raised his hand and waived at me. I smiled, returned the wave and turned back around and began to eat my breakfast.

I thought to myself, "He's so thin now. Not the big burley guy that I remember from back in 1957."

All of a sudden I heard the sound of dishes breaking so I spun around to see what had happened. Tony had accidentally hit several plates knocking them off the table as he was trying to get into his wheelchair, which had been parked in the bathroom hallway while they were eating. The

waitress ran over and started picking up the broken dishes and I listened as Tony and his wife tried to apologize.

As Tony rolled by me, being pushed by his wife, I looked up and I smiled.

"Roger" he said, as he nodded his head forward.

"Tony" I responded, as I nodded my head, in return.

I watched as they went out of the door and slowly made their way to a large van which had a wheelchair loader located in the side door of the vehicle.

I sat and watched as his wife tried, over and over, to get the ramp to come down. But it just would not work. Finally I got up, paid for my meal, and I walked up to the van.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Darn thing sticks once in a while" said Tony. "Could you help me get him in the van?" asked his wife.

"I think I can do that" I said, as I grabbed the wheelchair and rolled Tony over to the passenger door.

I opened the door and locked the brakes on the wheelchair.

"OK. Arms around the neck Dude" I said, as I reached down and grabbed him around the waist and carefully raised him up into the passenger seat of the van. As Tony let go of my neck I reached over and swung his limp, lifeless legs, one at a time, into the van so that they would be stationed directly in front of him.

"You remember. Don't you?" he said, looking directly into my eyes.

"I remember Tony" I said.

"I guess you are thinking 'What goes around comes around.'" he said, softly.

"I would never think like that, Tony" I said, with a stern look on my face.

He reached over and grabbed both of my hands and squeezed them tightly.

"Is how I feel in this wheelchair how you felt way back then when you lived in the orphan home?" he asked me.

"Almost, Tony. You are very lucky though. You have someone to push you around who loves you. I didn't." I responded.

I reached in my pocket and pulled out one of my cards that had my home telephone number written on it and I handed it to him. "Give me a call sometimes. We'll do lunch" I told him.

We both laughed.

Don't let nobody. Don't let nobody steal Jesus from you. And as hard as it may be---you be Jesus to all the Jesus stealers.

Did I tell you about the gay guy who was so harassed, who couldn't take it anymore, that he dropped out of school?