

Cornel Barnett  
Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
April 20, 2014  
Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10  
“Easter Art, Editorial and Action”

During Lent, my sermons began with congregational input on a work of art relating to the scripture text for the day. Today’s work of art, “The Risen Lord,” (an insert in your bulletin) relates generally to Easter.

My sermon today is in three parts: Easter Art, Easter Editorial and Easter Action.

Easter Art:

The artist, He Qi, was among the many people sent to the countryside during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As a young man, he escaped hard labor by painting pictures of Chairman Mao Zedong. During those years, he found a copy of Renaissance artist Raphael's “Madonna and Child” in a magazine and was so moved by the work that he painted copies of it at night.

He Qi earned a Ph.D. in religious art from Nanjing Art Institute, having studied medieval art in Hamburg, Germany. He was a professor of Christian Art at Nanjing Theological Seminary before moving to St. Paul, Minnesota in 2004. He was artist-in-residence for about six months at San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, a few years ago. He has worked in many universities around the globe. His work has appeared in many international journals and media outlets, and he has exhibited in Asia, Europe and the United States.

The simple and beautiful artwork of the people in rural China influences Hi Qi’s work. Within that framework, he seeks to redefine the relationship between people and spirituality with bold colors, embellished shapes and thick strokes. His work is a blend of Chinese folk art and traditional painting technique with the iconography of the Western Middle Ages and Modern Art.

What do you see in the picture? How is Hi Qi telling the Easter story? What do you see in the four quadrants? What is the picture telling us about life?

[Picture discussed]

Easter Editorial:

Former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination, and editor of the ecumenical magazine, *The Christian Century* (whose motto is “Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully”), John M. Buchanan, wrote this editorial last week:

“It’s Easter, and in many churches there will be crowds. Pews will be full to overflowing with worshipers, including many who attend church only once or twice a year. As a pastor I’d always greet them with something like, ‘If you only attend church once a year, this is the Sunday to be here. The music is powerful, the flowers are gorgeous, and everybody is dressed up and feeling good.’ There is more to it than that, of course. People come to church on Easter because they know that the subject is the oldest, deepest, most profound question in the human heart. Is there any reason to hope in the face of the inevitability of death? Is there any serious reason, in light of all the violence, suffering, and injustice in the world, to live with hope and resolve and confidence and joy?

“A friend sent me a paragraph she wrote for her parish’s Lenten devotional: ‘They all came. So do we. We come to be embraced in the dark hour. We come with regrets that once again we haven’t begun to measure up. We come for faith in the future and acceptance of the past. We come, over and over, for a million different reasons, but we come, finally, to reassure ourselves that we’re more than skin and bones.’

“People come to church on Easter because there is serious business on the agenda. They are not there to hear an explanation of how a dead body got up and walked out of the tomb. We may be tempted to try to explain, but it doesn’t work. The four biblical accounts are lean: each tells the story slightly differently and none provides a detailed account of the resurrection itself. It is almost as if they are telling us, like someone who warns us not to look directly at the bright sun, that we should not try to look too directly, that we should perceive this event in a different, deeper way – more heart than mind, more wonder than analysis. Some things are bigger than our ability to say them.

“If you must have a little hard evidence, you can do worse than ponder how human beings were transformed: frightened disciples cowering behind a bolted door emerged from hiding as fearless and fierce followers who could not stop talking and singing about what had happened, even in the face of persecution, arrest, and their own martyrdoms. What changed cowards into brave disciples was the conviction that their crucified friend was alive. Because death did not defeat him, there was no reason to fear anything, not even death.

“What transformed them was the same truth that raised up Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. It is the same truth that raises up men and women to live with courage and commitment in the midst of illness, oppression, and, of course, the insult of our mortality – the

Easter truth that love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death. The battle has been won. Jesus Christ is risen!”

Easter Action:

Easter action affirms life. Christian life is the opposite of anything that demeans, dehumanizes and pollutes. It is love, compassion, justice, hope, joy and peace. How this is affirmed in real life, ethically, legally, constitutionally, economically, socially, politically and relationally (with humans, animals and nature) takes volumes to explain and debate but the central principle is life.

The Easter challenge is to walk out of the door today and be life-affirming agents. Jesus stated along the way that, “The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy but I came that you may have life; and have it in all its fullness.”

My final statement about Easter action is intentionally open because we figure out for ourselves what the resurrection means and how we must act. Jesus rose from the dead and so can we. Amen.