

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**  
March 9, 2008  
Centennial Celebration

**The Story Continues**  
Acts 1:1-2

In my sermon last Sunday I spoke of the mission statement which was drafted as this building was being completed in 1908. Our present mission statement has been adapted from the 1908 document. Both statements emphasize the imagery of the door. "Let the door of this church be a way to service."

When W. Francis Irwin stepped into this pulpit at the dedication service in 1908, he clearly knew about the new mission statement. It was after all printed in the program. I suspect that he chose the first two verses of Acts as the scripture text because they provide a way of opening up the meaning of that mission statement. These verses emphasize the continuity between the ministry of Jesus Christ and the work of the church in the world.

Luke wrote the book of Acts to help the church understand its mission in the world. That mission has been set in motion by the resurrection of Jesus Christ which has turned the old world on its head. The resurrection signals that an old order is passing away and a new order is coming into being. The church then and now is living "between the times." An old order based on privilege and power is determined to hang on while a new world based on God's justice and grace continues to be born. In the new order every form of exclusion whether by race, gender, national origin, or religion is no longer acceptable. Luke had a definite vision of a multi-ethnic church. This was to be a church for Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Because we live between the times we have to choose every day in which of these worlds we will live.

Our identification with the new order of Christ is enacted in the sacrament of baptism. In baptism we join Christ in dying to the ways of the old order and being reborn as servants of God's grace. Baptism is the door through which Jesus' ministry becomes our ministry. Jesus' story continues in us. Luke wanted his people to understand that.

The same insight is expressed in the eleventh chapter of John. There Jesus' friend Lazarus experiences the underlying reality of the old order, death. Jesus arrives too late to prevent his friend's death. But then he sets out to change the reality of the situation. He calls his friend out of the old order of death so that they can go together through another door. Lazarus is to be let loose and unbound from the grave clothes in which he is wrapped so that he can join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. On that road they will give their lives for others.

Frederick Niedner describes that journey in these words:

We die every day, as each day wears us down, defeats us and brings us ever closer to the first tomb Lazarus knew. But we also die in the waters of baptism. Like Lazarus, we die with Christ...Like Lazarus, the baptized also rise and respond to the call to head out for some place in space and time where we can give away our lives.

We find ourselves terribly hindered, however, by the grave clothes that still bind us. We can't walk the walk of the resurrected when we're still bound by the old habits that the fear of dying has taught us so well. Thankfully, we find ourselves in a community to which Jesus can say, "Unbind him, Let her go (*Christian Century*, February 26, 2008, page 21.)"

W. Francis Irwin understood that truth. The church exists so that we can be unbound from the old order of death. That's what empowers us to serve in the name of Christ. That's what ensures that the story continues in this place for another hundred years. The door of this church cannot be a way to service unless it is first a way into a community where we are formed by the new order of grace.