



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Something So Wondrous**

John 12: 20-26

The Rev. John Edgerton

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People had already begun gathering in Jerusalem. Huge crowds of people, there for the Passover festival, and the preparations had already begun. It was among the holiest times of year for the people, and it was in fact a religious requirement that people come to the festival. They were there to remember the central story of the people, the exodus. They were there to remember a confrontation against a wicked king, to remember a captive people crying out to be free, to remember a departure into the wilderness, the inauguration of a time of wandering, of the common life of the people totally transformed, stripped back to survival.

And all of this was being done beneath the shadow of the power of death — because the occupying army, too, had come along with the crowds. Signs of their presence were everywhere; you could not miss it.

But for this particular year, everyone was talking about one person. About Jesus. Word of Jesus had spread far and wide, so far in fact that there were some travelers from Greece, from the far side of the sea who had travelled hundreds and hundreds of miles just to see Jesus. People were saying that he could deliver the sick from their illness. And that he could hold huge crowds spellbound with his words, gaining followers by the day. And that he even had brought a man back from the dead — not even death was his equal, people were saying.

Everyone was talking about Jesus, wanting to see him, wondering — could it be true? Something so wondrous? Could it all be true? How could it?

When Jesus learned this, that people from across the sea even were there to see him, he began teaching them. He was speaking in his riddles again, in his parables again, as he often did.

“Unless a grain of wheat should fall to the earth and die, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

“Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus would so often do this. He would speak of ordinary things. He would talk of sheep wandering off from the flock and of building houses on a good foundation and harvesting grapes and planting wheat in the earth. He would talk of ordinary things, when what he was discussing was life and death, the ways of love and the paths to hate, time and eternity. He speaks of wheat, and harvesting a good crop. He speaks to a people who are surrounded by the power of death, held under its thumb, deprived of the good things of life; he speaks to them of how this will all grow into a good and bountiful crop, he speaks to them of how from death something new and good will grow, something more valuable than what had fallen to the earth, many times over. A good and bountiful crop would grow. And the people must have wondered — could it be true? Something so wondrous? Could it all be true? How could it?

We gather today just before the time of Holy Week. Palm Sunday is next week, and the preparations have already begun. And as we look ahead to that holy festival time, I cannot help but look back at the year just past. And so much has been lost, both individually and collectively. So much has been lost in a year. Among a million different people there will be a million small heartbreaks — graduation traditions lost, proms just canceled, long-awaited dream vacations scrubbed, weddings put off and off and off, jobs lost, no theater, no dancing, no take me out to the ballgame; life’s joyful occasions sliced away from life, pared back in service of survival, life pared back of everything except survival. A million little heartbreaks in every million people.

And then there is the deeper, irreplaceable heartbreak of death. 515,000 dead just in this country. And among them are our own church members, and family of those in our church, our friends, our neighbors. This damnable disease: it has proven so indomitable all year. Our whole way of life, we have had to bury it for the past year, stick it down in the ground and try our best not to remember all that has been lost, just so we aren’t overwhelmed by the enormity of it. It has been buried for a year, and the words of Jesus return:

“Unless a grain of wheat should fall to the earth and die, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

From this time of death something new and good might grow, something more valuable than what had fallen to the earth.

Could it be true? How could it? What would that even look like?

It might look like our families becoming closer at the end of this than they were at its beginning, more devoted to one another, more overjoyed to gather. It might look like our church being more faithful at the end of this than we were at our beginning, more ready to be in prayer for each other, more eager to sit and be the church together. It might look like our town being more equitable at the end of this than at its beginning, our leadership more diverse, our policies more equitable, our common life truer to the aspirations we place at our heart.

From this time of death something new and good might grow, something more valuable than what had fallen to the earth.

Could it be true? Something so wondrous? Could it all be true?

An entire year, with the way we had been living simply buried beneath the earth, a year planted like a grain of wheat beneath the soil. What crop shall grow from this? What harvest might be possible with something so unthinkably precious having been consigned to the earth?

“Unless a grain of wheat should fall to the earth and die, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Jesus spoke these words to a people who were under the power of death, a power that seemed indomitable. And Jesus speaks these words to us. And so we turn our hearts and our spirits to Jesus with just one question: Could it be true?