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Jesus Makes Everything Better

A Eulogy for Kate Holbrook

Sam Brown

Kate Holbrook (born January 13, 1972) died on August 20, 2022. She was academic collaborations director at the Church History Department, noted author, and cohost, with her husband, Sam Brown, of the Committed Conversations podcast series (coproduced by BYU Studies and the Church History Library). This is Sam's eulogy delivered at Kate's funeral on August 27, 2022.

I've been writing this eulogy in my head for some years now. Several times it has seemed clear that Kate would be leaving us soon. But then she has stayed. And now she is gone.

The image I keep returning to in my mind, year after year, is of my wife's funeral as the worst day of my life. I was right. It is the worst day. And, yet, true to form, even this terrible day is made brighter and better by the very fact of Kate. That's the effect she has on the world. That's the meaning of her being. Kate makes everything better.

She does so in the very specific ways she has lived. Characteristically, she asked that our eulogies tell stories of the love of God and the bounties of life in Jesus. So, for these precious moments, I will share stories about Kate and about Jesus. Who also makes everything better.

Jesus started his ministry as a Jewish prophet from Israel's northern wilds. His followers and his enemies disagreed about a lot, but they agreed on one thing. This Messiah from Galilee was anointed to be the new David, the King to unite broken Israel and Judea. He would overthrow the Romans and destroy the puppet regime in Jerusalem. Israel's

centuries of heartbreak would end when he assumed the throne. That's why disciples followed him and enemies wanted him dead. As best as anyone could tell, that was Jesus's life mission until the very end.

And then, suddenly, he was hanging dead from the stiff remnant of a lifeless tree. Those earliest Christians knew what God had in store for them, and the degraded corpse of an executed criminal could not possibly be the Messiah. There would be no liberation, no hope for the future. Their whole world had died with this broken man from Nazareth.

And then, unimaginably, on the first Easter Jesus made everything better. Horrible, yes. Beyond description. And also, gloriously better. This is what Jesus does. This is who Jesus is: a new world, a new story, a new God, new power, new life. Not what we wanted or expected. Not at all. Better than that.

Although I brought to our marriage a secure belief in God, Kate has taught me to believe with my whole heart in the reality of Jesus. Not just as the wilderness prophet or a moral teacher or a great idea, but as the Word of God, the creative force that sustains, enlivens, and gives meaning to the cosmos of otherwise blind atoms and mindless quantum fields. And also as the Jesus who is the embodied, resurrected Savior living out our eternal connection to our heavenly parents.

When the cancer returned, in her liver, four-and-a-half years ago, we realized that there would be unwelcome limits to Kate's lifespan. That was hard going. As we thought about what her early death would mean, she told me that her greatest desire was to help mother the children of our beloved children. And there was one other thing. She'd always had a sense that she had a mission to minister to the women of the Church on a global stage, perhaps even as the churchwide Relief Society president. There was no arrogance in her, no raw ambition. Just love and an inner spiritual calling. She despised the limelight but was willing to bear the heat of those bright lamps if God asked her to. We wondered, among other things, what would happen to those worthy dreams if her cancer had metastasized in her middle forties.

Life did not turn out how we hoped it would. And life has been glorious. This life has been better than it would otherwise have been because of Kate and because of Jesus. Jesus makes everything better. The Atonement so intimately associated with Jesus is a real force of setting right and sitting together in love. Jesus and his Atonement are the deepest form of empathy, an embracing love that transforms both the lover and the beloved. Kate knew that reality and lived it.

Before COVID, we spent a lot of time in what we called “community grandparenting.” Sacrament meeting was like a trip to an old-time county fair, as we collected babies from tired parents and entertained them on our pew. It was a family affair, involving all the Holbrook-Browns fighting playfully for the right to hold the stolen infant of the day. Outside of church, we did free babysitting. We watched our friends and neighbors love their children, and we loved the whole lot of them. We didn’t get to grandparent the way we wanted, but grandparent we did. It has been wonderful.

Shortly after her cancer returned, she was called as Relief Society president for our ward. She served with passion and commitment. I loved to watch her eyes light up as she pondered the next, best thing to do for someone in need. When she developed complications from her cancer treatments, she had to step away from that formal calling. But she had served well. Around the same time, she was asked to be an expert scholar on a global broadcast covering topics in Church history. She became an overnight celebrity in our Latter-day Saint world. People sometimes walked up to us in the Salt Lake City airport to tell her she was famous and *who exactly was she?* or, more pleasantly, to explain how her influence had changed their lives for the better. At a friend’s wedding this year, a thirty-something we sat next to at a dinner table said, “You’re famous for something.” I took great pleasure in introducing myself as Mr. Kate Holbrook for these last few years. She served well, and she served as the person she truly was. A careful and capacious thinker who loved God, loved the Saints, and loved the Church. A daughter of God passionate about the dignity of women and the opportunities for female power to help our community grow in strength and love.

She and I have even had the compromised pleasure of growing old together. It took her therapist making that comment to help us see that fact. But there it was, right in front of us. Her body aged several decades in six months. And I received the sacred opportunity to be of use to her in her advanced age. It was hard and hallowed work that extended to the very last moments of her mortal course. We have grown old together, sad, so sad, and also whole.

Following a contemporary cultural script, sometimes people in recent months have told her how horrifying or terrible her plight was. Their hearts were and are in the right place. They have loved well and bounteously. But Kate couldn’t understand those comments. No life is horrible, no vouching of life a mistake. Life was holy to Kate, and blessed.

Even as her own physical life painfully faded, she was grateful. It was never excruciating. It was hard for a while. And it was glorious too. Jesus makes everything better.

Atonement is a force, made real in the person of Jesus, that brings together incomparable realities. Earth and heaven, human and divine, terrible sadness and overwhelming joy. Atonement says and makes real the fact that life is not *merely* anything. Life is not simple or straightforward. It is better than that, holier than that. More than that.

Kate's last book, which will be published after her body is buried in earth, hinges on her awareness that, often, "both things are true." That is Kate's sacred vision of Atonement. And this is where we now stand, in the encompassing shadow of Christ. With our right hand, we shelter the truth that death is not the end, while our left hand encloses the reality that death is a terrifying tragedy. With our right hand, we hold the fact that we must live in community or die. In our left, the reality that we must bring into that community the person that we really are and the person we truly may become. In our right hand, today is the worst day of our lives. In our left hand, it is a day of sublime joy and ardent celebration. Maybe that's what we mean when we bring our two hands together in one traditional sign of prayer. We can hold the world's contraries in our hands and in our hearts. Because they are true and because they are ours.

Kate had me see a therapist when her cancer recurred. I was struggling terribly with my vision of what life would be like without her. He told me I should be resilient and wrote the name of an academic book on the topic on a sticky note. I never saw him a second time. But I did read the book. It was a circular argument about how you can handle stress better if you're already psychologically healthy. That didn't help me much, as I felt like I was already broken by the anticipatory grief. "To get well you have to be well" sounded like the dumbest thing I'd heard in decades.

As I've lived with this question and as I've grown into the yoke of the cancer husband, though, I've come to see this psychological fascination with resilience in a new light, the light of Christ. What people call resilience was for Kate a story about living in atoning relation with Jesus. We do not need to be well to get well. Not at all. We need Christ. We need to trust that, together, we are adequate to whatever may come.

Jesus used an old Jewish aphorism in his Sermon on the Mount to make this crucial point. "Don't fret about tomorrow," he said. "Every day has enough troubles of its own" (see Matt. 6:34). This isn't Buddhism, as much as I respect Buddhism. Nor is it Stoic indifference, what the

ancient Greeks called *ataraxia*. This is pure Jesus—in Christ we can hope for and yearn for and love what comes to us, *and* we can work hand in hand with each other to make what does happen better than it would otherwise have been. We will seek, and we will adapt. Life will not go how we want it, even if sometimes our hopes will in fact align with the divine order. But life in Christ is the possibility of all things made better than they would otherwise be.

Through community grandparenting, Kate honored her sacred and righteous desire to co-parent our children's children. Through her scholarship and public ministry, she was able to serve the great and mighty union of the global Relief Society. As she faded from life, we grew old together.

That, I believe, is the story that needs to be told: Our lives are enriched beyond any imagining by the yoke that binds us, heavily, to Christ and to each other. Life will not have the contour we have chosen for it. But our lives will have a glorious shape, made better by our straining forward. Sometimes we will walk, sometimes run, sometimes stumble. And all things will be better in Christ. I pray that we may live and, when our time comes, die in that glory. That prayerful beating of my soul's heart is inspired by sweet and wise Kate Holbrook and offered, to you and to her, in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.