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# Crucifixion

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My name is Susan Ashbrook Harvey. I am professor and chair of religious studies at Brown University, where I teach the history of Christianity.

The depiction of crucifixion changes over centuries. Around the 12<sup>th</sup> century there's a change in how artists depict the death of Jesus, and we begin to get a tremendous focus on suffering, on a human Christ who really dies, and on the horror of this event.

We're now standing in front of a 15<sup>th</sup> century large painting of the Crucifixion, and it is a horrific and vivid depiction. This image shows Jesus large in the forefront, and much larger than the two thieves that are crucified on either side of him as seen in the background.

It is a depiction that has nothing to do with crucifixion as it was originally performed, because you didn't tie people to a cross. They were nailed in through their wrists and through their feet, but here he's nailed through his hands.

The painting itself is one that gives a lot of attention to very realistic faces and postures, and in places where it veers out of the realistic it does so in kind of surrealistic extremities.

So Jesus is crucified between two thieves whose crucifixions are strange, bizarre, and torturous, and who themselves are portrayed – particularly the one on the right – with a monstrous face. There's an evil demon that's goading this thief. This is the thief who mocked Jesus on the cross, and beneath Jesus' right hand is the other thief looking right at him. This is the thief who calls over at the moment of Crucifixion, "Remember me, O Lord, in your kingdom," and Jesus blesses him from the cross. So he's looking at Christ and heaven awaits him, unlike the thief on Jesus' left – our right – who is looking away from Jesus, and at the demon.

The faces of onlookers are etched with surprise and horror, and also perhaps somewhat mockery because they are depicted as those who killed God himself, so you see some distortion in their faces. Down in the front left corner – our left – we have the Virgin Mary who has fainted in her grief, and she is held in the arms of the beloved disciple John. Jesus has said from the cross, "Mother, behold your son. Son behold your mother," and bequeathed Mary and John to one another. So here he holds her in her grief, and her posture reflects that of Jesus himself. For her there is no life without the life of her Lord and her son, and so his death brings its shadow or its mirror in her own response.