Grace to you and peace from Jesus Christ our savior and brother. Amen.

When I was in my early twenties, I learned that I have a birth defect. It’s called *pectus excavatum*, and I inherited it from my father, who has a more severe case than I do. *Pectus excavatum* is an indentation in the bone at the very bottom of the breastbone, where the ribs come together, sort of a little cup-shaped hole in the sternum. When I was growing up, I thought that it was normal; I didn’t realize that most people’s chests don’t cave in at the bottom of the sternum. Practically, what it means for me is that my lungs are a little more squished together than most people’s.

Then my first daughter was born, and from Anna’s earliest days as a newborn she discovered that the little cavity in my chest was the perfect size for her hand to fit into, and so whenever she snuggled with me or nursed, she would rest her tiny fist in my *pectus excavatum* where she could feel my heartbeat. This was a source of great comfort to her. I remember one time when she was a few years old, she tripped and fell while we were visiting with friends and started sobbing. I sat down next to her and said “Here, put your hand in mommy’s *pectus excavatum*” and Anna reached her hand into that little spot to feel my heartbeat, and she instantly calmed down. And my friend whose house we were visiting started laughing and said, “that’s the most bizarre method of comforting a toddler I’ve ever seen!”—and she was right. But it worked. A brief connection between parent and child facilitated by a defect in my bone structure was a source of deep comfort and healing for Anna.

Many people these days, perhaps especially those who live alone or who are far from loved ones, are longing for that kind of connection—even just a momentary reaching out, like when we share the peace in church, or when you give a friend a hug because you haven’t seen them in a while. There’s something about the tangibility of flesh that just can’t be replaced by Zoom calls or Google hangout chats or FaceTime sessions. I remember a week ago Saturday night when I glanced out my window and happened to see Pastor Dick sneakily placing a lawn sign in my front yard from the St. Luke’s Sunday School teachers that said “We miss you, Anna and Miriam,” and I went on my front porch to say hi to him, and we were about fifteen feet away from each other, and it felt so strange and wrong that we were half-shouting across the lawn to each other and we couldn’t get any closer. It just felt so odd.

“**I will not leave you orphaned,**” Jesus says to the disciples. And we believe him, all these centuries later, because we know the whole Christian story and we know that he’s talking about sending the Holy Spirit. But can you imagine being one of those original disciples? He hadn’t yet been crucified and risen from the dead, and they had no concept of a Holy Spirit like we do; they just knew that they were having dinner with him and he was saying goodbye. He was telling them that he was leaving. It must have been heartbreaking—at least to the extent that they understood.

It must also have been perplexing, because as much as they loved their friend Jesus and knew on an intuitive level that he was far more than an ordinary person, they didn’t have the philosophical framework to understand what he was saying. Fully divine and fully human? God from God, light from light, being of one substance with the Father? They didn’t have any of that language, and their belief system certainly didn’t include a Messiah who would preach and do miracles and gain a following only then to be put to death on a cross.
I imagine that the disciples that night might have been on board with the “If you love me, you will do my commandments” part. They’d already set aside their nets and made some big sacrifices in order to follow him and learn from him. But then he says, “I’m leaving you and sending in my place this abstract thing you’ve never really heard of called a Spirit, an Advocate, who comes from the Father.” If I’d been one of the disciples with Jesus that night, I imagine I’d be feeling pretty frustrated by that point.

But did you notice how he introduces them to the concept of the Holy Spirit? He says “I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, whom the world neither sees nor knows. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.”

He doesn’t say “you will know the Spirit when the Spirit comes and starts abiding with you.” He says, “You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.” They already have the Spirit. It’s been with them all along, already abiding with them.

This is the context in which Jesus says to the disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned.” And we believe him, all these centuries later, because we know that he’s talking about the Holy Spirit and we know that we already have the Spirit, that the Spirit has been with us all along, already abiding with us.

We are separated, one from another, that is true. And it’s not an easy separation. Some of us are getting sick or will get sick; others are losing family members to COVID-19, including their parents. So yes, we are vulnerable right now to being left orphaned on a literal level. But if anyone has the right to speak metaphorically about such things, it’s Jesus on the night before his betrayal. He has the right to say it because we know the truth of what he says next: “Because I live, you also will live.” As we are buried into death with Christ at our baptism, so will we be raised again with him to new life.

I think a lot about those days when Anna was a baby, when all it took to comfort her was a touch, a palpable heartbeat. These days her hand is too big to fit in my pectus excavatum. So instead, she and I talk about an invisible line that connects the two of us, my heart to hers. And I have to admit, this invisible line is something that I made up on the spur of the moment one night when it was late and I was trying to get her to go to sleep and she was saying, “Don’t leave me; I can’t go to sleep if you and I are separated.”

So I said, “Don’t worry; we won’t be separated because I’ll just be a few rooms away. And anyway, we’re always connected, you and me, by an invisible line that stretches between our hearts, and no matter how far away I am from you, that line will always be there. And it goes up and down stairs and around corners, and it can even stretch across the world. And that invisible line can never be broken, even when you move away from me someday, even when I die.”

Anna looked at me with suspicion and asked, “How do you know the invisible line can never be broken?” And that was the moment I stopped making things up and started telling Anna the truth about the world. I said, “That invisible line will never be broken because it’s the love that God gives us through the Holy Spirit.”

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says to the disciples. And he didn’t leave them orphaned. And he doesn’t leave us orphaned. Amen.